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MAGAZINE

NOVEMBER 1997

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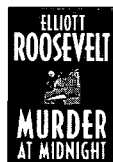
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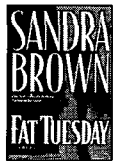
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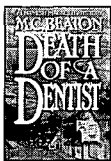
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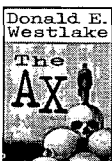
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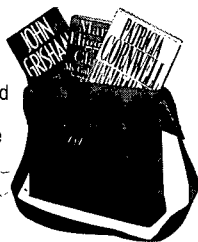
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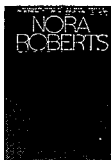
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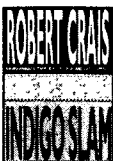
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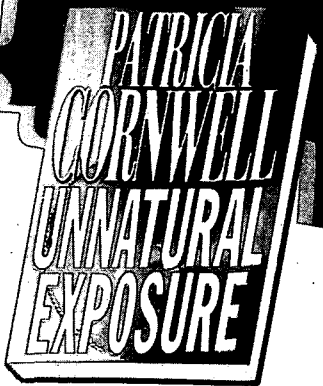
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ALFRED HITCHCOCK MYSTERY MAGAZINE, Vol. 42, No. 11, November, 1997. Published monthly except for a July/August double issue by Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications. Annual subscription \$33.97 in the U.S.A. and possessions, \$41.97 elsewhere, payable in advance in U.S. funds (GST included in Canada). Subscription orders and correspondence regarding subscriptions should be sent to P.O. Box 54625, Boulder, CO 80322-4625. Editorial and Executive Offices, 1270 Avenue of the Americas, New York, N.Y. 10020. Periodical postage paid at New York, N.Y., and at additional mailing offices. Canadian postage paid at Windsor, Ontario, Canada Post International Publications Mail, Product Sales Agreement No. 260665. © 1997 by Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications, all rights reserved. The stories in this magazine are all fictitious, and any resemblance between the characters in them and actual persons is completely coincidental. Reproduction or use, in any manner, of editorial or pictorial content without express permission is prohibited. Submissions must be accompanied by a self-addressed, stamped envelope. The Publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts. POSTMASTER: Send Change of Address to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, P.O. Box 54625, Boulder, CO 80328-4625. In Canada return to 3255 Wyandotte Street East, Windsor, Ontario N8Y 1E9. GST #R123054108.

USPS:523-590 ISSN:0002-5224.

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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

A thought: Robert Burns a writer of Halloween fare? No? Sure? What about—

"Gin a body meet a body
Comin' through the rye;
Gin a body kiss a body,
Need a body cry?"

Think it over.

Actually, in our Mysterious Photograph the skeletons are laughing. But then there isn't any kissing going on.

There are bodies all over the place in this issue's stories as well, some a little spookier than others—as is appropriate here at (sort of) Halloween time. And although G. K. Chesterton's "The Secret Garden" is a locked-room tale, not a ghost story, it has its hair-raising elements.

And then there's new writer

Kimberly Haugh's "Exceptions," her first mystery story, which is chilling indeed. Ms. Haugh, currently doing graduate work at Quincy (Illinois) University, is fond of such varied items as Australia and sky-diving.

Two other new (to us) writers also join us in this issue.

Alaskan Steven C. Levi, who brings us "The Materializing Corpse," has written extensively; when he's not writing, he is a distributor of exotic meats like caribou, musk ox, and reindeer.

Georgia resident L. A. Wilson, Jr., is a physician who "grew up in small towns on the coastal plains of North Carolina" and who now is in private practice in Atlanta. "Jazreen" is his second publication and first mystery; he's "an avid deep sea fisherman, photographer, and music enthusiast."

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The Web

Stephen Wasylyk



At the fifth chirp of the phone Ben Bennis aimed a glare in the general direction of the ladies' room.

Elizabeth, the emaciated ambulatory fashion statement hired to answer sheriff's depart-

ment calls, was undoubtedly admiring—for the tenth time that morning—the latest cutting-edge dye-and-perm creation by the salon where she spent a great deal of her time and more of her money.

Leo beat him to the phone, listened, glanced over, and traced 1032 in the air with a forefinger.

Ominous numbers. He'd thought he'd settled matters at that address once and for all.

Already moving, Leo said, "Laura Deveraux. She found Marie Halstead dead. Let's go, Amato."

Ben waved Amato back to his desk. "I'll go. I need the fresh air. Exactly what did she say, Leo?"

"It appears as though Marie died in her sleep."

Outside, Leo paused before opening the door of the cruiser. "Laura went over there every morning after she saw Albert leave for his morning run. Nurse wasn't due for another hour, and Marie might need something. If she was dead before Albert left, he should have known it. What kind of man goes jogging without first checking on a sick wife?"

Rhetorical question. A wife-beater seldom becomes kind and considerate after his wife suffers a heart attack.

The Halstead and Deveraux homes were in a treelined cul-de-sac with precise shrubbery, generous, tree-studded, sloping lawns, and curved driveways. Fifty feet apart, they were of brick and stone with dormers, a big bay window on the first floor, and an arched front door.

Two of a half dozen built twenty years ago for well-paid management types when the local corporations thrived, none had become vacant after the county's economic earthquake although recent selling prices brought shudders to mortgage holders.

Leaning against the car an hour later, Ben fumbled for his cigarettes. One left. Not bad. The note he'd been making when he'd opened each new pack showed he'd stretched this one out for forty-eight hours. Down to ten a day.

The paramedics were sliding Marie's body into the EMS van. Autopsy next, of course. Dying at home without a physician in attendance qualified everyone for that stainless steel table, regardless of race, religion, color, country of origin, or socio-economic status. Nothing leveled the playing field like death.

He and Leo had taken their time examining the room, Leo taping with the videocam, both hoping to find something on which to hold Albert, their nomination for Scumball Husband of the Year.

Nothing unusual in sight except for the usual life support apparatus, oxygen tank, and twelve prescription vials on the nightstand. *Twelve?* Ben was convinced all doctors owned huge blocks of pharmaceutical stocks.

Leo had carefully placed the bottles in an evidence bag, wheeled out the medical equipment, and gone back to seal the room.

Albert protested. "Dammit, you'd think I killed her or something! She was a very sick woman!"

"Standard procedure until the autopsy is done," lied Ben blandly. He'd stepped back to examine Albert, one of those highly charged short men out to prove lack of height was no handicap with an ego so big it belonged in New York, the acknowledged home of superegos. Still wearing the expensive, futuristically colored jogging suit in which he'd left the house, gleaming white running shoes on one end, big-nosed, pudgy face capped by a few strands of a styled haircut combed forward in bangs on the other. He'd looked in on his wife. She'd been asleep. Or so he said.

"Why don't you jog a few more miles? I've heard exhaustion is a good way to handle grief."

For a split second Albert seemed to turn into one of those comic strip characters whose eyes project a stream of daggers.

He was standing now in the arched stone doorway watching the proceedings wind down and obviously wishing they would all get the hell out. Ben couldn't remember a man he'd disliked

more. Annoyed because his wife's damaged heart refused to stop beating on its own and thereby make life easier for him, quite possibly Albert had stilled it himself. Ben would have liked nothing better than to toss him into a cell while listening to him whine that she was going to die anyway, but he probably couldn't pin a thing on him.

He ground his cigarette out on the pavement.

"He killed her, you know."

The voice was cultured and precise. Laura Deveraux was at the other end of Ben's popularity scale. Tall, slender, in her mid-forties; her dark hair was pulled away from the patrician face and queued with a small ribbon. In sweatshirt and slacks she was beautiful in the way that well-built, graceful, and dignified women are no matter what they wear. Arrogance, though, in the tilt of her head and the way she stood. Deveraux characteristic. As he'd told Emily, "When the first Deveraux arrived, he bought land for a few beads. Everyone after him had to pay a few hatchets. Absolute proof that Deverauxs are smarter than anyone else." Emily had given one of her ladylike snorts. "More like absolute proof that real estate always goes up."

Laura waved a slender hand. "He's been slowly killing her for

years. Whatever he did this morning was only the final step."

"Unfortunately, the law requires evidence."

"If it's there, I'm sure you'll find it. He never laid a hand on her after I called you. Whatever you said to him was very effective." She smiled slightly. "You never told me what it was."

And never would. Taking a man aside and telling him he'd do his jogging in a wheelchair if he ever again physically abused his wife was nothing any officer would want broadcast if he wanted to keep his badge.

The voice turned vicious. "She should have been far away from that selfish, thoughtless, sadistic bastard. She deserved a little peace during her last days, but she wouldn't leave. I'll never understand why any female puts up with a man who treats her like dirt."

"Perhaps in hope he'll change."

Her lips thinned. "Hope is an empty vessel. I read that somewhere."

"Maybe she couldn't afford to leave."

"She had money of her own. One reason he married her."

"Ah."

She glanced at him. "Motive? But he makes a rather nice salary as VP at Moldcar, plus bonuses. I should know."

That she should. She'd been

executive secretary to Henry Fallow, the president of Moldcar until he'd sold out. More than just a secretary, the tongue-waggers said, but no one had ever come up with the equivalent of a signed motel register to prove it.

Those years had produced enough money invested wisely, possibly with Henry's help, to allow her to walk away with pockets full, just as Henry did when the new owners took over. She, however, could enjoy the fruits of her labor. Henry and his wife had been short-changed.

Ten months ago Henry, after imbibing a bit too much celebratory champagne at a farewell party, challenged a semi head-on in his Lincoln Town Car—the airbags accomplishing nothing more than to keep them alive long enough to get to the hospital. He and his wife now reposed in the cemetery instead of their Florida condo. The balled metal of the Town Car rusted peacefully in a corner of Del's auto body repair lot while the insurance companies involved seemed to take turns misplacing the files.

"Please let me know what you learn," she said.

Ben touched the broad brim of his hat. "I will."

Zep Seidman, the short and bald medical examiner, shrugged

huge shoulders under a smock that hung to his ankles like a white shroud. "Nothing to tell you, Ben. Congestive heart condition. Should have been in intensive care waiting for a transplant, but her physician said she wanted no part of that. Maybe she wanted to die. Some people do, you know."

"No sign that her husband pushed her a bit?"

"If he did, you'll never prove it. Nothing in her blood that wasn't supposed to be there, not even an overdose of one of those medications, which are all legitimate by the way. A few fibers in her nasal passages might indicate a pillow pressed to her face, but then she's been in bed for weeks, so they could have crept in there on their own. And since she was on oxygen, he could have pinched the tube. She wouldn't have had the strength to struggle enough to leave any signs. But why bother? All he had to do was wait."

"Not his style. When he wants something, he wants it now."

Zep shrugged again. "I've given you my opinion."

"Some vibrations there that neither you or nor the videocam can pick up."

Zep grinned. "Emily indoctrinating you into her pursuit of the paranormal?"

"My wife's hobby has nothing to do with it. Just an old cop's gut feeling."

Zep glanced down. "Well, you've got plenty of room for it."

Emily slid the steaming microwave dinners onto the table and joined him. Mistress of the microwave, which gave her more time to pursue so many activities that Ben couldn't keep up. If she wasn't off crusading for women's rights, she was at the church, at the seniors' center, taking a course at the local campus of the state college, attending a seminar on her new interest—the supernatural—or somewhere else she hadn't bothered to mention yet.

"You are," he once told her, "the busiest, fastest moving, blue-haired gin and tonic drinker in the county."

The dinner actually tasted like real food, which couldn't be said about his rubbery creations when he had to cook for himself.

"If you think something went on in that room, Ben, you might consider bringing in a psychic I know. She can feel evil emanations. Perhaps she can sense—"

"Any psychic who gets within ten feet of Albert will feel evil emanations so strong her circuits will melt. He slapped his wife whenever he felt like it. His treatment of her after her heart attack should be against the law. He hits on every woman who comes into view. Good Lord, he even propositioned

Elizabeth. And I'm told people who work with him at Moldcar wear armor plate on their backs. Yet people play golf with him instead of running him out of town. Shows what position and power can do."

He waved his fork. "But he's only one factor. Something tells me there's more to come."

Emily pounced like a predator on its prey. "Aha. Marie's ghost is whispering in your ear."

"The only thing whispering in my ear is instinct."

"Call it what you like, but stop waving that fork. You're splattering beef gravy on my floor."

Leo was running the tape he'd taken of the room. Six feet tall, his chief deputy was a blond, big-shouldered Viking throwback, smarter than Ben had been at his age. Which wasn't saying much, since Ben considered almost all young people smarter than he'd been at that age. He pondered that. He'd had plenty of room to improve, but how much smarter could they get?

"Tell me you found something," said Ben.

"Not so far. Nothing on the tape and nothing from that medical equipment I had state police forensics check out. I'm still puzzled by why he didn't call. Marie had to have been dead before he left. It's a little too much to be-

lieve that she died in the ten minutes it took Laura to get there."

"I agree, but the Alberts of the world are masters at covering their rear ends. He might have thought it better if Laura found her. He'd know we'd be suspicious of him, but if he was out jogging . . . and that story about considering her still asleep fits his character. Any reason why we can't unseal the room?"

"Unfortunately, none that I can see."

"Okay. I'll tell Laura Deveraux we found nothing and do it while I'm out there. I suppose Albert will be home. Even he'd have to make a pretense of grief by not going to the office until his wife is buried."

"Take Ellie along. You know the D.A.'s new rules. Always have a female officer with you when you talk to a woman in her home. Even you. All a woman has to do is file a sexual harassment complaint—"

"Which in my case no one would believe—"

"Dream on. Even Emily might look at you out of the corner of her eye."

Ben grinned. "At my age she'd say it was a touch of the supernatural. C'mon, Leo. Laura Deveraux is more likely to bash a man with a chair than complain that she was sexually harassed."

"Aren't you the guy who told

me never to assume what a woman would do? Take Ellie."

Ben threw up his hands.

Léo imitated the gesture. "Hey, you can't be too careful about sex these days."

Ben parked at the curb, reached for his cigarettes, and looked at his notation of when he'd opened the pack. Too soon for another.

"Nice house," said Ellie.

She filled out her uniform nicely, wore her dark hair in a pageboy cut, was pretty enough to draw wisecrack comments, and had gray eyes that could turn smart-ass sentences to icicles in midair.

Ben looked at the Deveraux house. Not so far that Laura couldn't hear a drunken Albert abusing his wife. If she hadn't called, the abuse would have continued because most wives never complained. She couldn't stand Albert, but she'd been a good friend to Marie since the Halsteads arrived with the new executives after Moldcar had been sold. Became a second and unpaid nurse after Marie came home from the hospital, which was why she'd discovered the body, the paid nurse not due for another hour when Albert left for work.

Laura answered her door dressed in a white blouse, tan

jodhpurs, and polished black riding boots.

"Keep a horse in the back yard, Miss Deveraux?"

A smile flashed. "Hardly. He's at the riding academy. I assume you've come about poor Marie. Come in."

Ben introduced Ellie as Laura led them into a room that could be called a study. Brightened by a row of windows facing the Halstead house, it contained a wall of books, a huge, soft leather chair in one corner facing a console TV, and a built-in table holding two computers and accessories.

She motioned toward the leather chair, pushed the single-pedestal office chair toward Ellie, half sat on the computer table, noticed him studying the PC's, and smiled.

"When business began to become involved with computers, Henry said one of us had better understand what they were all about and become proficient in their use. Guess who that was. Actually I didn't mind. I found them so fascinating that I became a computer bug. Must have the latest and best. Do you—"

"Complete mystery to me. I intend to leave them that way."

She ran a finger across a keyboard, half smiling as though enjoying a private joke. "You'd be amazed at the information

you can find, sheriff, but that's neither here nor there. What about Marie?"

"Nothing says she didn't die normally no matter what we suspect."

She turned, looked at the house next door for a few moments, and faced them again.

"I'd hoped you'd do better," she said softly. "Still, a man's transgressions always catch up with him, sheriff." She rose. "Thank you for letting me know."

As they crossed to the Halstead house, a battered pickup pulled up to the curb. A big man descended; straight black hair, well over six feet tall, heavy, sloping shoulders, massive hands and arms, craggy brow, and outthrust lower jaw. The ground seemed to tremble when he walked. He saw Ben and whooped.

"Sheriff Ben!"

For a moment Ben thought he'd be hugged, but the crushing handshake was formal and the grin wide.

"I see you got a pretty lady deputy here, Sheriff Ben."

Ben introduced a wide-eyed Ellie.

"George and his brother Kermit always seem to be around when I need them," he said. "Is that a power mower in the back of the pickup, George?"

"Sure is, Sheriff Ben. Me and

Kermit gone into business, mowing people's lawns and such."

"What about the farm?"

"Oh, she's all right. She feeds us but don't hardly give us much cash, you know? Days when we couldn't even buy us a couple of beers. So Kermit starts talkin' that one of us ought to get a job, 'cause the farm don't really need both of us full time, like. Sound-ed good, but the oney thing we know is farmin' and ain't no farm around here needin' any help. So we was drinkin' beer one night and talkin' about it when Luther Anderson hears us and says he'll give one of us a job mowin' lawns and pay six dollars an hour. Well, I was ready to grab a mower right then, even though there weren't no moon out, but Kermit says we'll just think about it."

"I thought that was what Kermit wanted."

"So'd I, but that Kermit can be deep sometimes."

Kermit deep? Nice people, but neither Morrissey would ever qualify for a Rhodes scholarship.

"After Luther went away, Kermit says Daddy always told us, don't be thinkin' you know how to do somethin' till you learn from a man who knows how. Then when you do her, you'll do her right."

"Makes sense to me, George."

"Kermit says, you learn how

to do her from Luther, then we'll buy our own mower and maybe make seven dollars an hour." George chuckled. "So that's what we done. I told you Kermit can be deep."

"The free enterprise system embraces us all, George. Have many customers?"

"More'n I can handle. Not much different than farmin', you know, taking care of growin' things. I jes' come by to tell Miss Deveraux I'll be doin' her cuttin' tomorrow 'stead of today. Din expect to find you here. Nor your pretty lady deputy."

"Take care of the house next door, too?"

George scowled. "No way. Daddy said the oney thing you do for any man who is mean to his woman is bop him, but Miss Deveraux says if I bop this one I'd surely get in trouble so I din. 'Course, if you give me permission, bein' the law and all, I'll be glad to do 'er, even though the poor lady being dead he can't harm her no more."

"I'll keep your offer in mind, George."

"Lord, he's big," whispered Ellie as they walked toward the Halstead house.

"Never get him or his brother mad."

Albert answered the door, snapped, "It's about time," saw Ellie, and immediately turned on a smarmy charm that had

Ben thinking about throwing up on his Italian shoes.

He removed the seal on the bedroom and took one last look around, aware that Ellie's eyes had been taking in both houses like a critic for *House Beautiful*.

At the car he said, "Like what you saw, Ellie?"

"No: Beautiful but there's one thing missing. As a man, you may not have noticed."

"That's what my wife always tells me. What did I miss this time?"

"No love in that place. I've been in homes with secondhand furniture that felt warmer and more comfortable."

She waved at the Deveraux house. "None there, either."

He'd really missed that one. No question about it. Far smarter than he'd been at that age.

"Laura Deveraux very disappointed when you told her we can pin nothing on Albert?"

Ben hooked a hip on Leo's desk. "Probably but hid it well. Said a man's transgressions always catch up with him."

"I'm surprised she didn't blow up. I once heard a prosecutor at a trial say the defendant radiated hate. Thought it a bit dramatic, but I'll tell you, Ben, taking her statement yesterday—she's always been so cool and collected I never expected it

from her, but whenever Albert's name came up, I'll swear I could see the hate shimmer around her. Funny thing for her to say, though. Almost as if she has something in mind."

"Like causing Albert severe bodily harm? I'd need more than her hating the guy to think so."

New hairdo piled high, the fat Gorgonlike ringlets a peculiar shade of mauve, Elizabeth had been haughtily pretending to ignore their conversation, frequently lifting a long-nailed hand to be certain no tendrill had gone astray.

"Might be one of her favorite sayings, sheriff. In the salon, about a month after Henry Fallow and his wife were killed, we were talking about all those men who lost their jobs when he sold the company. Carol Ann Kularski asked her what she thought. We all knew Carol Ann was being like—" she rolled her eyes "—well, *catty*, you know, everyone thinking that Laura and Henry . . . we thought she'd defend him, but that's when she said the same thing."

"How did the assembled beauty worshippers react?"

"I mean, we were very surprised she'd say that . . . as if he'd been punished for putting those men out of work. But as one of the girls said later, she lost her job, too, didn't she? And Carol Ann laughed and said

that maybe she'd lost more than her job, you know?"

Ben and Leo looked at each other.

"Thank you for that update from the local CNN news center," said Ben.

He motioned Leo to follow, retreated to his office, and closed the door.

"I'm not sure what all that meant," he said, "but if you're thinking what I am, why don't you wander over to Del's auto body and take a close look at that wreck?"

The short, grease-covered length of rubber hose rested on a paper towel on his desk.

"Power steering," said Leo. "Someone made a small slit with a knife. Gradually lost all the fluid."

The Town Car was big and heavy and not easy to steer without power assistance. Ben had lost his power steering once, instantly confronted with the necessity of using both hands and a great deal of strength, rather than turning corners easily with only one. Not a great problem for anyone sober and alert, but Henry had been far from sober. By the time his champagne-soaked brain had sorted out the significance of the panel warning light and the suddenly more difficult steering, he'd drifted across the road, the

semi roared around the curve, and it was too late.

Leo folded his arms. "Damn. The alcohol level in his blood threw us off. He couldn't have walked a straight line, much less driven one, so we assumed that was why he was on the wrong side of the road."

Ben shrugged. "Better late than never. Someone obviously wished the man grievous harm."

"Logic points to one of the men who lost his job; but thinking about what Laura said . . . if that romance between her and Henry was real, he was running out on her. If it wasn't, she wouldn't be the first to fall in love with her boss, misinterpret a few things he says or does, fantasize that one day the two of them would walk off into the sunset hand in hand. Then Henry sells out, and he and his wife are moving to Florida, and her dream dies. Same motive." He spread his hands. "All right, maybe I'm reaching. What can she know about cars?"

Something seemed to settle inside Ben as though a missing piece had fallen into place.

He poked at the greasy hose with a pencil. "Smart woman, Leo. She could learn, but she's also smart enough to know it couldn't be from someone around here whom we could find easily. To be safe she'd need a

source who didn't know her, couldn't identify her, would have no idea if he was talking with a man or woman. Just a friendly person helping solve a power steering problem, who would have no idea of when, where, or how the information would be used."

"You've lost me."

"Understandable. You didn't see that gleam in her eyes when she talked about her computers. You'd be surprised at the information you can find, she told me, when I said I wanted nothing to do with them. Maybe she couldn't resist a little dig at a dumb sheriff who probably still uses a quill pen. Those computers give her access to a world of information. Good Lord, kids have learned how to build bombs through their computers. No big step to realize how she could have used hers. And remember her opinion of a man's transgressions. Any doubt that Albert is next? Two problems. How do we prove it, and how do we stop her?"

Leo slid down in the chair, clasped his hands behind his neck, and stared up at the ceiling.

"You know you've got a spider web up there?"

"Let's worry about poor housekeeping later, shall we?"

Leo rose and stretched both arms toward the ceiling. "Hail,

solitary and crafty spider, spinning his deadly web to trap his unwary victim! I salute you!"

"Aw, man." Ben shook his head. "From a housekeeping critic he segues into poet-in-residence, and a lousy one at that. *What the hell are you talking about, Leo?*"

Leo grinned. "Spinning an electronic web."

The smell of freshly cut grass hung in the air, the roar of a powerful mower emanating from the rear yard.

Ben told himself that the worst that could happen was that he'd look like a fool; but he flipped away his cigarette like a man ready for the firing squad. One too many today. Tension always did that to him.

The bell brought Laura Deveraux to the door dressed as though ready for a women's clothing catalogue photo session; white lowcut blouse, highwaisted tailored slacks, hair piled high. She and Henry Fallow might never have had the romance everyone talked about, but no one could tell Ben that Henry had never considered one.

She invited him into the computer room, turned, smiled, and asked, "News about Marie?"

Get right to the point, Ben.

"About Henry, really. His death wasn't accidental. The car was sabotaged, you might say."

Her eyes widened. "Sabotaged? Who would want to—"

If he'd had any doubt, her reaction erased it. No one who'd been as close to a man as she had simply widens her eyes when she learns his death was no accident. She should have taken acting lessons, but then she'd probably never considered that she'd need them.

She took a deep breath. "I see. When he sold the company, a great many men lost their jobs, didn't they?"

"So did you."

Arrogance made her words snap. "I certainly don't know how to sabotage a car."

"For a person with your intelligence, it wouldn't be difficult to learn. We may find someone at the restaurant that night who saw a woman doing something under the hood of a car. Thought nothing of it because cars today are no mystery to many women. Or someone who saw a tall woman washing grease from her hands in the ladies' room. She might even have a little on the gown she wore that night. Expensive, I'm sure, so she may not have thrown it out, and cleaned or not, forensics will find traces. In the meantime Leo will be searching the computer networks for someone who discussed a power steering problem ten months or so ago. And

we may even find the knife in this house."

She really should have asked what knife?, but he wasn't certain she'd heard anything after the slight stiffening when he'd said computer networks.

"Really, sheriff—"

"What you did wouldn't have guaranteed that Henry and his wife would be killed. You might have only wanted them injured, but when they died, you could hardly confess."

"Oh, come now—"

"Henry's transgressions, real or not, gave you a motive. I can understand why you wanted to punish him. But I can't understand why you killed Marie."

He could sense her withdrawing into herself, her eyes turning cold. Body language, Leo called it.

"That timing never felt right. If she'd been dead when Albert looked in on her, he'd have wasted no time announcing his good luck. Instead he probably cursed and went jogging. Ten minutes later you came in and found her dead. The odds were against Marie's dying in those ten minutes. But suppose you'd helped? Impossible to believe. She was your friend. But so were Henry and his wife, and if you'd already killed two, what difference would one more make? Mind telling me why? I've already told you I can prove nothing."

She studied him as though debating something before coming to a decision.

"She'd been begging me to do it for days," she said softly. "Yesterday she told me he'd looked down at her and said, 'When the hell are you going to die?' and walked out. If you could have seen her . . . I couldn't say no any longer. I pinched her oxygen off for a few moments."

Her eyes were wet.

Ben nodded. "And encouraged us to suspect Albert, but if nothing came of that, you could still take care of his transgressions the way you took care of Henry's. You can forget that now. You were one step ahead on Henry, his wife, and Marie, but if anything happens to Albert—"

Outside, the mower had gone silent.

"Why should you care what happens to a man like that?"

"I'm surprised you'd ask."

Her eyes were examining him as though he were a specimen pinned to a board.

"You're right, sheriff. I didn't intend for Henry and his wife to die. And Marie asked me to do what I did. But Albert . . . I owe that to her."

The Deveraux arrogance was never more apparent. She probably expected him to knuckle his forehead and mutter, "As you wish, my lady."

Her head lifted. "I'll give you

a choice. Forget this conversation and do the world a favor by keeping quiet about Albert. Or—

"Or?"

"—I'll scream, and when George comes running in, I'll say you attacked me. You can imagine how any accusation you make afterward will appear. You'll not only lose your good reputation but probably your job."

Ben felt a chill. Terrible weapon in the hands of an unscrupulous woman. Half the people would believe her. The other half would never be sure.

He folded his arms. "Well, I always wanted to know exactly how good my reputation is, so go ahead and scream your damned fool head off."

Her eyes narrowed; a poker player in a high-stakes game trying to decide if her opponent was bluffing.

With one swift movement she raked nails across his cheek and tore open her blouse, her scream loud enough to be heard in the next county.

Ben blinked. That braless expanse of white flesh hadn't been on the agenda at all. Pressing a hand to the smarting scratches, the best he could manage was a choked "Damn" as George lumbered into the room.

She pointed a trembling finger. "He attacked me!"

George reddened and looked at the ceiling. "Aw, Sheriff Ben wouldn't tack no lady. You must be playin' some kind of game with me, Miss Deveraux."

"It's no damned game! Don't you believe what you see?"

"Got no idea why you're exposin' yourself, Miss Deveraux," said George, eyes still averted. "Best you cover yourself up."

"No one is interested in your opinion!" she snapped. "You'll be my witness, you moron!"

George looked hurt. "A lady with her bare bosoms hanging out for no reason ought not be callin' names."

Ben patted the scratches with his handkerchief. "It seems as though my reputation is holding up."

She glared at him.

George glanced up, spun, and disappeared, to return a moment later dragging a struggling Albert by the collar.

"This fella was peekin' in at Miss Deveraux's nekkidness, Sheriff Ben. Want I should bop him one?"

Half choked, dangling at the end of George's arm, Albert croaked, "Heard . . . scream . . . wanted . . . to . . . help!"

His noble intentions didn't prevent his bulging eyes from being riveted on Miss Deveraux's bared breasts.

"Let him go," said Ben.

Albert staggered, one hand

clutching his throat, the other smoothing his hair. His eyes never shifted. Face full of loathing, she drew her blouse together.

"Don't take it out on George, Miss Deveraux. No witness could have helped." Ben unbuttoned his shirt slowly. "The view of my anatomy won't be as delightful as yours, but technically speaking, it's more interesting."

The small microphone taped to his chest was black against his white skin.

"Wired," he said. "Just like on a TV cop show. I may be electronically ignorant, but my people are not. Leo was inspired by a spider's web, of all things. Step this way, please."

The day had turned dark and cool as if matching Ben's sudden mood. Albert asked a question. He looked at him stonily and pointed, and when a glowering George stepped toward him, Albert departed for home hastily.

Leo and Ellie drove her away, leaving Ben with no sense of triumph.

He wished he could cover up her attack ploy, but the scratches were on his face and the words were on tape so there was no way the story wouldn't get

out. And make it more difficult for any woman with a legitimate complaint to be heard.

Hey, look what happened to the sheriff.

Not that he'd escape completely.

She's a goodlooking woman. Maybe old Ben did put a move on her. No one else there, you know.

The D.A. had it right. Always take a woman officer along, but if Ellie had been with him, Laura would have never said a word.

George shifted uncomfortably. "She goin' to jail, Sheriff Ben?"

"The D.A. decides that, George. I only arrest them."

"I asked Deputy Leo what she done wrong. I see ladies exposin' themselves on the TV and all, so she couldn't hardly be breakin' no law that way. He said she got herself caught in a web."

One that she'd created herself. The first delicate strands must have appeared in a corner of her mind a long time ago, and she'd never brushed them away; the gossamer network finally too strong to break.

Depressing to realize that the last half hour showed she didn't even know it was there.

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FICTION

EXCEPTIONS

Kimberly Haugh



She couldn't see the clock. Which, at first, didn't seem that odd because the room was pitch black, the way she liked it at night. The only way she could sleep, actually, with all the lights off, the door shut tight, and heavy drapes pulled together over the windows. She could relax then, the total darkness enveloping her, taking her back to the safety of the womb. It used to drive David crazy, she remembered sleepily; he always wanted at least one light on, even when—especially

when—they were making love. He would wheedle and complain and finally refused to make love at all, light or no light. "Are you afraid of the dark?" she had teased him, early in their marriage, when she thought they could joke about things. "I am not afraid," he'd snapped, mortally offended. "I just hate not being able to see." He'd started to reach for the switch, she'd felt him move, and she stopped him. "I like it," she'd said all those years ago. And it was still true. But maybe David had a point because, come to think of it, you really couldn't see anything in here. And she really did want to know what time it was.

Except she couldn't see the clock.

Which, when you thought about it, was absolutely ridiculous. The clock was digital, the only type of alarm clock you could buy any more. Not like the clock that had sat on David's nightstand for years, the old fashioned standup alarm with the little hammer thingamajig pounding against two separate bells. This was the clock of her divorce; she had bought it the day she'd moved out. Bought it and put it on the dresser across the room so she had to get out of bed to silence it. Couldn't hit the snooze and slide back into dreamland four or five times like David used to do. No, she had to get up and race across the room, feeling blindly on all sides of the clock . . . and all the while it shrieked eh-eh-eh like a maniac. No comforting ring like on a real alarm clock, just the constant eh-eh-eh and the glowing numbers. Unless of course the electricity was off. Maybe that was it, had it stormed earlier? An April shower bringing May flowers and knocking out the power as well?

Except she could hear the hum of the refrigerator.

Which was a soft, steady drone, the song of a busily working bee. And the tinkle clink of another ice cube falling into place. She shook her head, trying to knock the cobwebs away. No problem with the electricity, then. So it had to be the damn cat, Jezeby—for Jezebel and what kind of stupid name was that for a cat? David's idea, of course, accusing her even then of being a poor wife, an unfaithful wife . . . enough! She shook her head again, rubbed the sleep from her eyes. It had to be the cat, climbing up the dresser, digging her claws into the walnut finish, and plopping her fat butt down right in front of the clock.

Except Jezeby had run away.

Which would have been fine with her, stupid old cat. Jezeby had been more David's cat anyway, but their daughter loved the mangy thing, too. That's the whole reason Jezeby had come with them to

the apartment. Amy had insisted. And hadn't she been complaining just this morning that she hadn't seen Jezzey for two days? "Where could she have gone?" Amy had wondered. Good question, not that it mattered. If that idiot cat never came back it would be too soon. Because even if it wasn't Jezzey this time climbing up the dresser, ruining the dresser, that would have been exactly the type of thing David's cat would love. Almost as if it were punishing her for ending the marriage. The same way Amy punished her sometimes, pouting, opening her mouth only to argue . . . Amy was friendly now only when she wanted something. Oh sure, then there were smiles. Then there was common courtesy. Come to think of it, maybe Amy was blocking the clock. Not lying on the dresser, of course, but standing in front of it, half in and half out of the door. Patiently clearing her throat, hoping Mom would wake up. Maybe Amy had had a bad dream, wanted to climb into bed like when she was a much smaller girl.

Except Amy was gone for the night.

Which was normal these days, what more could you expect from a teenager? Amy was pretty, outgoing, had more friends than she could count. Gone all the time now, staying out till all hours with Tandy or Mandy or Bippy or Dippy or whatever their names were, then back to the friend's to spend the night. She wouldn't be back till Sunday morning at the very earliest, though she'd probably call in tomorrow just to let old Mom know she was still alive.

But she still couldn't see the clock.

Which was just downright crazy. Because if the power was on and Jezzey wasn't in front of the clock and Amy wasn't in front of the clock, well . . . something was blocking it. But there was nothing else. Her mind searched for every explanation . . . grabbing, rejecting, grabbing again. Suddenly she had to see the clock. It wasn't an important thing, it was the only thing. The time didn't matter; the clock, that was the thing. The clock was reality. The clock was sanity. The clock meant normal life, and if it wasn't there, where was it? Had it fallen off the dresser? Had it shorted out? Was it waiting now with smoking wires to start a fire? She threw off her blankets. She stood up, blinking and peering into the darkness. She would find the clock. She took a step toward the dresser, reached out to turn on the overhead light . . .

Except that was when she felt his chest.

Which made her scream and scream and—

Except it was too late.

□

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FICTION

Jazreen

L. A.
Wilson, Jr.



Illustration by Dan Krovatin

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 11/97

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I must have been almost forty years old when I first paid any attention to what they called senile dementia. It first garnered my attention when Uncle Raymond wandered outside at three A.M. one November morning, sat down in a creek behind his house, and damn near froze to death. Uncle Raymond had always been my favorite uncle—the one who gave me my first drink of beer and bought me a new rubber because the one I carried in my wallet had been there so long it was beginning to dry-rot. Some time after he recovered, I asked him why he had done such a foolish thing, and he mumbled something unintelligible at me, causing Aunt Corene to shake her head with pity while whispering, “Poor old fella,” over and over. His garbled words just wouldn’t leave my mind. He had always been a man who was lucid and in control of his wits, and I have no words for the pain it caused me not to be able to hold a conversation with him. I was about two hundred fifty miles from Roanoke Rapids on my way back to Atlanta when one of the words he had mumbled finally recirculated in my brain until it coalesced into some kind of recognizable form. It was a name, unfamiliar and strange—*Jazreen*.

About every two months I

struggled up enough energy to make the eight hour drive from Atlanta to Macon, North Carolina, to see the remnants of my family. It seemed to be something that I needed in order to make some sense out of the various identities that constantly struggled for preeminence in my brain. The Atlanta police department’s Big Al Ivey still had an unyielding yearning to become Albert Lee and be doted over by friends and family under circumstances where nothing was required and nothing was expected.

On this visit I had journeyed to Roanoke Rapids, a few miles down the road from Macon, where I discovered another identity that I was learning to enjoy. To eleven-year-old Robert Sherrod, I was Cousin Albert, who seemed to conjure up myriad fascinating images in his mind. I was sure it was because he pictured me as one of the gun-toting, butt-kicking, irreverent superheroes that seemed to fill all the movie screens. I hadn’t done much to discourage the notion. It fed my ego, and I convinced myself that kids needed heroes, so what the hell.

We walked down the long, winding path whose central tuft of weeds was flanked by bare dirt packed hard by countless tractor and truck tires. Robert crept, stalked, and slipped

noiselessly through the brush flanking a pine grove that was much smaller than I remembered from my youth. He clutched his fishing pole like a rifle, playing the same games that I remembered so well from my own childhood. He darted ahead of me and out of sight, heading for a small stream that flowed through the property from the nearby Roanoke River. It was a place of warm memories tinged with a sadness in the knowledge of friends and family from a time long ago who were gone forever.

I stepped into a dry creekbed and felt an instant rush of bitter memories. It was the place where Uncle Raymond's failing mind had brought him to sit in its freezing waters as if impatient to feel death's chilly touch. The creek was gone now, undoubtedly a victim of some development far from here that had diverted its waters elsewhere.

Suddenly Robert's voice exploded my memories. It displayed a mixture of fear and excitement. I stumbled through the bushes trying to follow the sound of his yelling.

"Cousin Albert, quick! Come see this!"

He was standing in the creekbed near a large cement pipe that had once sent water under one of the paths that

crisscrossed the woods. The place was overgrown with reeds and wild holly, and it was hard to move without suffering the scratches and needlelike pricks that the foliage inflicted.

"Look! Look down in the pipe!" he insisted.

I moved past Robert and used the end of my fishing rod to push back the brush so I could peer inside. The visual shock ripped through me like a jolt of electricity. I dropped the rod and jumped backwards, falling on my butt and hyperventilating myself into a dizzy state. It was gone before I had even hit the ground. It had been there for only the briefest instant, disappearing in less than the blink of an eye. I scrambled to my feet and peered again into the dingy light within the pipe. It was empty, but she had been there. The image, no matter how transient, was still imprinted on my brain—a woman dressed in something dark had sat there staring back at me.

"Robert, what the hell did you see in there?"

He didn't answer at first. I could see the astonished look on his face as he watched my strange reaction—a reaction that had apparently frightened him.

"It's all right, man," I tried to reassure him. "What did you see? Why did you call me?"

“Just that,” he answered nervously, pointing inside the pipe.

I stepped closer again and used the fishing rod to sweep away the spider webs that hung thickly inside the pipe. In the dried gray mud on the floor of the pipe were partly covered bones. They were large bones—human bones. A skull’s hollow eyes looked up at us, and I backed out of the pipe. I didn’t consider myself a superstitious man, but being there just didn’t feel right. The place had an ugliness about it that defied explanation. It filled me with dread. There had been something there for which being a policeman had done nothing to prepare me. It wasn’t the bones. It was like a smell that only the subconscious could detect.

“What else? What else did you see?”

“N-n-nothing,” he stammered.

“Wh-what did you see?”

“Nothing,” I sighed. “Nothing. Let’s get away from here. We need to let Isaac know about these bones. This is a job for the police. We don’t need to be here.”

“Yes, sir.”

He never said yes, sir to me before. I knew he was afraid. I draped my arm around his shoulders as we walked back. He didn’t feel much like talking, and neither did I.

*

I owed Briscoe Falcon a visit. For the past thirty years he had continuously been the most amazing man I had known. I had no doubt that he’d consumed at least a pint of whisky every day of his adult life without ever getting cirrhosis. I, like most people, couldn’t remember a day when I hadn’t smelled liquor on his breath. There was something to be admired about Briscoe, however. He was somewhere in his eighties and had been his own man all his life. He had been my father’s acquaintance and my uncle’s old road dog. My mother claimed she hated him, but in truth everybody harbored a little respect for the old man who never took any crap and grew old just the way he wanted. A few years before, he had shotgunned a man he thought had done a disservice to an elderly lady-friend. Everybody just shook their heads and mumbled his name under their breaths disapprovingly while the sheriff tried to figure out what to do with him. The incident just heightened my respect for him. It took balls to go after a man less than half his age with a gun, but Briscoe was that kind of man and I kept close to him because I knew his kind wouldn’t come along again during my lifetime.

I sat in his cluttered little add-on room behind his sister’s

house and tried to see if I had truly arrived yet—if I could finish a glass of Jack Daniel's before he finished the pint. He shook his head disparagingly as he watched me frown in response to the alcohol's sting in my throat. "Don't feel bad. Your daddy couldn't drink either." He grinned sympathetically and scratched his head through his uncombed afro. "I hear y'all found some bones out behind Raymond's house."

Small towns were like that. I didn't even bother to ask him how he knew.

"You helping Isaac out with it?" he asked.

"Naw, I got to get back to Atlanta in a couple of days. I just came down here to check on Mama."

"You don't have to worry about your mama. I'll check on her for you."

"All right now. Watch your mouth. I don't play that."

"I didn't mean it that way," he laughingly protested. "Hell I been knowing that girl since we were in grade school. I mean I'll look out for her."

I slapped him on the leg, although I knew from the twinkle in his eye that he hadn't taken me seriously anyway.

"Y'all find out who them bones belong to?" he asked.

"I don't think so, but I haven't been keeping up with it. Isaac

said the crime lab told him they might have been there forty to fifty years. They know it's a woman, and that's it."

"Hell, if y'all waiting for Isaac to get something done, it ain't gon' never happen. That boy's slow as black molasses. Always been slow, even before he got to be county sheriff."

"All right now. Lay off Isaac. That's my boy. And give me some more of that liquor before you finish the bottle."

"You ain't finished that you already got," Briscoe complained.

"The way you're going, when I do finish, there won't be none left. Come on, pour me some more."

Briscoe reluctantly poured a thimbleful of additional whisky in my glass. "You know everybody in town's got an opinion about those bones, Mr. Falcon," I said. "My aunt thinks it's somebody the Klan killed. You been here longer than most folks. Who do you think it is?"

He took another sip and answered quickly as if he didn't have to think about it. "Could be Jazreen."

The name jerked my head upward in instant recognition. Uncle Raymond had been dead for over two years. He had a stroke a year after he wandered into the creek behind his house. I still remembered his garbled

words that I had finally figured out on the way back home. *Jazreen*. Here was the name again, and it was pulling me into a place where I really didn't want to go. This wasn't my problem. It was something curious—an oddity—but I was a policeman, and it called to me. Questions and mysteries burned away at people like me. Then there was the thing, the face, whatever it was that fooled me, tricked my mind, and made me think I saw something in that pipe. I had shoved it aside, refused to talk or think about it; but it was there just gnawing away and pissing me off just enough to make me consider . . .

"That was one bad bitch," Briscoe muttered absently as if reflecting on something much deeper. "That's one piece of ass I'm glad I didn't never git. I reckon I was too old for her anyway, but hell, I was younger than Crawford Sanderson—and better looking, too."

"Who was she? I heard Uncle Raymond call her name. Did he know her?"

Briscoe took a last gulp of whisky without answering. He leaned back in his chair and just looked at me for a long time. "I ain't got no right to talk about that woman," he finally said almost apologetically. "She left from around here back in '48 or '49. Hell, I'm getting sleepy.

Liquor used to not bother me like that. You think I'm getting old?"

I scrutinized him for a few seconds before answering, "Na-a-w," and we both laughed.

I left Briscoe without thinking about the woman or the bones much. I had a job to go back to in Atlanta. Everybody in this rural county was always fond of saying how the Lord moves in mysterious ways. I had always thought it was a figure of speech, but I was to find out differently and very soon.

"Albert Lee, this is Isaac. I'm down here at the County Extension Service. It's your mama. I think she's had a stroke. You better meet us at Halifax Memorial."

Isaac's voice had been as morose and serious as I had ever heard it. His words played over and over in my mind as I raced to the hospital. I had just dropped her off for her quilting class and gone back home to pack for my drive to Atlanta later that day. All I could think about was whether there was something I should have noticed about her—something that could have saved her and me from this pain. It was a type of pain that seemed to haunt little towns like Macon. Every time I returned, there was a litany of names of people we had known

and loved most of our lives who were now dead or dying. A few years ago it had been my father, then Uncle Raymond, and now my mother.

I drove the few miles from Macon to the county hospital in Roanoke Rapids and found my mother smiling at me and repeating one of her favorite sayings: "All sickness ain't death." She had no residual weakness from whatever had happened to her, but the doctors decided to keep her anyway. If nothing else, hospitalizing her made me feel better. I called Atlanta from her room to tell my chief that I didn't know when I was going to return.

Isaac Johnson sat with us for a long time. We had grown up together and Mama had taught him in elementary school, so he felt like family. Isaac was a man with mental limitations, but he knew his job and had done it well enough to move from the one-man police force of Macon to county sheriff. I could tell from the way he fidgeted and made repetitive small talk that he had something on his mind besides my mother's health. He finally got it out when I decided to take a break from the hospital for a while.

"You know I was over to Uncle Raymond's house yesterday. The Roanoke Rapids police don't want to fool with those bones

you found, since it was outside the town limits," Isaac began.

Everybody still referred to everything Uncle Raymond had owned as his, as if Aunt Corene didn't exist.

"So it's all on you?" I asked.

"Yeah, I guess. You know, I asked Miz Corene whether she remembered anything funny going on around there back in the fifties, and she cussed me out. Damn near ran me off. I don't know what I said to piss her off."

Isaac looked at me in that penetrating, inquisitive way that implied he was very serious although he had chosen to broach the subject somewhat indirectly. It was a behavior quirk that caused outsiders to underestimate men like Isaac, assuming they were dumb when they were really simply adhering to a Southern tradition of politeness and respect. Our friendship demanded that he avoid the discourtesy of asking me directly if my aging aunt was acting suspiciously because she'd had something to do with those bones.

"I don't know either, Isaac, but I'll talk to her. Maybe you just caught her on a bad day."

"Maybe. You let me know what she says, hear."

I hadn't quite lied to my friend Isaac, but I wasn't about to ask Aunt Corene about any-

thing that might get her fired up. She was an excitable woman who took tranquilizers most days just to lower her level of agitation to some functional plateau. I always wondered if Uncle Raymond's trek outside on that cold November night was really an attempted escape from his wife.

Aunt Corene was out chopping wood when I arrived. She still cooked on a woodstove that my grandmother used to own. I suspected that the old stove was worth more than her whole house. I was surprised to find a well-dressed white man in his mid-thirties apparently engrossed in a rather serious conversation with her. He stopped talking as I drove up and blocked his car with my own.

"Hey, Aunt Corene. I just stopped by to let you know that Mama's in the hospital. She had a light stroke this morning. She seems like she's all right, though."

"Lord have mercy!" she exclaimed fearfully. "You sure she's all right?"

"Yeah, she was smiling and talking when I left."

The man stood to the side watching us sullenly, looking annoyed at having been interrupted.

Aunt Corene came nearer to me as she continued to inquire about Mama. Some of what she

asked was repetitive and unimportant, and I got the feeling she was pushing the conversation to get me to stay.

"Who is this?" I finally asked.

"Oh, this is Mr. Flowers. He's a lawyer."

Flowers fidgeted impatiently and made no move to greet me or be civil.

"And what does my aunt need with a lawyer?" I asked.

"I was just interested in a few things about the property. Nothing really important," he said.

"It was important enough for you to drive out here," I countered.

"I'm really not at liberty"

"He wants to know where you found those bones," Aunt Corene explained.

"What's it to you?" I asked.

"Nothing, I really . . ."

"Then you really don't need to be here, do you?" I had him on the defensive, and I planned to keep it that way. Lawyers have a way of worming their way into your business before you know there's an advantage in it for somebody. They're never completely straight with you, and by the time you finally figure out what's going on, they've already scammed you and left.

"Look, I wouldn't want your aunt to get in trouble with the police . . ." he began.

"What police?" I asked. "The Roanoke Rapids police are out of

it. This is county jurisdiction, and I know for a fact that the county police didn't send you."

The man grinned sheepishly at me and tried again to convince me of his sincerity. "Look, all I want to do is see the place where you found the bones—look it over, take a few pictures."

"I don't think so."

"I don't think you want to upset certain people around here, Mr. Ivey." The tone of his voice shifted radically.

"I really don't give a damn," I taunted him. He knew my name, and I could surmise that there were other things in his devious little mind that he knew and would keep hidden.

"Maybe you should."

"And maybe you should take to wearing a bulletproof vest when you go where you're not wanted."

His jaws went rigid, and his skin flushed almost as red as his hair. He gritted his teeth and glared at me as if he were trying to gain control of himself. I knew he really wasn't. He was too small and too soft to think about doing anything except talking. He walked briskly back to his car and spent a few minutes maneuvering it so he wouldn't have to ask me to move mine.

"Hmmp, looks like you take more after your uncle than your daddy. You talk 'bout as much

trash as Raymond did," Aunt Corene chuckled. "Can you drive me over to the hospital to see your mama? I ain't gon' feel right until I lay eyes on her myself."

I was more than happy to do that. I still hadn't worked up enough nerve to ask her about her encounter with Isaac. Getting her out of the house, however, would give me the chance to find out why this lawyer was so interested in seeing where I found the bones.

Searching a forty-year-old crime scene is pretty much a waste, and nobody had made any effort to do it except for picking up as many bones as could be found. I sat on the shallow bank of the streambed wondering where to start. There had been a minimum amount of digging in the sediment of the pipe, but the place was otherwise undisturbed. At some point I became aware that my heart was pounding as a vaguely sensed anxiety began to build deep inside me. The memory of the discovery rushed in on me. The woman, the face—there for a fraction of a second. Was it real? What could it have been? Christ! Why did I feel this way—like someone was here besides me? I was becoming overwhelmed by an almost oppressive feeling of dread. I wanted to leave. I felt compelled

to leave there immediately, but I couldn't, at least not yet.

I got down on my knees in the streambed and began to scrape the soil with a small pocketknife. I don't know why. I think I saw an archaeologist doing it in a *National Geographic* magazine, only he had a brush. I kept at it for a long time, and I don't know why I was so persistent with so little to be found. Eventually I found a couple of small bones. I suspected they were what was left of some fingers. I picked a small piece of mud-caked metal out of the soil. I spit on it and rubbed it until I could at least identify it as the front of an earring.

Suddenly it got cold—bone-chilling cold. I had that feeling that I was being watched. My heart started to pound again. I knew somebody was standing behind me, and the more I thought about it, the surer I was of its reality. I wanted to turn but was terrified to do so. It wasn't little freckle-faced white lawyers that I was afraid of. I didn't want to think of what I really feared. I made myself turn anyway. I jerked around, stretching my eyes wide, but nothing was there.

It was then I realized that I had spent four hours digging in that streambed, and I knew that Aunt Corene was ready to come home by now. It was my excuse

to leave. I couldn't keep thinking about what was there. Men didn't scare me, but I wasn't prepared to cope with my imagination.

I waited until Aunt Corene was back home before continuing to clean the small gold earring. Although it had been caked with hardened mud, its luster returned immediately under a warm stream of water. The gold's sparkle seemed untainted by time or the elements. On its gently concave surface was a delicate and intricate inscription of the letter *J*.

"I found this in the creekbed while you were at the hospital," I informed her.

She walked nearer to the kitchen sink where I stood cleaning the earring. She seemed to deliberately maintain a relative proximity but was careful not to approach too close. She stood back and craned her neck slightly to see what I was holding.

"Here, take a look at it." I handed her the earring, but she moved quickly away in order to avoid taking it.

"I ain't got no use for that."

"Take a look at it," I insisted. "It's got a *J* inscribed on it."

She glanced toward it briefly, then averted her eyes to something else in the room that was irrelevant and unimportant.

"Get that out of here. I don't

like dead folks' stuff in my house." She walked away as she spoke.

"You ever heard of a woman named Jazreen?" I finally got enough nerve to ask her a question directly.

She stopped abruptly but didn't turn.

"Where'd you hear that name?" she asked in a subdued voice.

"Briscoe Falcon. He was wondering if those bones I found belonged to somebody named Jazreen."

"I don't know why you'd pay any 'tention to that drunken old bastard. I don't know nothing 'bout no Jazreen, and you need to get away from here asking me 'bout something like that."

"Aunt Corene, I know this might sound crazy, but when I first looked in that pipe, before I saw the bones, I saw a woman sitting in there. I just saw her for a second, and then she disappeared."

When she turned, her face was seething, and her words erupted like venom.

"Boy, you better get away from round me with that. I don't want to hear nothing else 'bout it. I don't 'preciate you coming over here with this, and you ain't got no business snooping round my property like that. You ain't the police—not here you ain't!"

This was just what I feared. Aunt Corene could be a raging, nonstop maniac when something got her fired up. The timbre of her voice seemed to rise in excited progressions. She had spent eight months in the state mental hospital in Goldsboro a long time ago over something nobody ever wanted to talk about. It didn't take any smarts to see my best move was to get the hell out of there and let her calm down.

Nothing is worse than to be in law enforcement and have the tormenting feeling that a member of your own family might be involved in something dirty. I couldn't imagine Aunt Corene being involved in killing anyone, but I didn't know her when she was a younger woman and perhaps controlled by different passions.

I couldn't ask my mother anything at this point. The last thing she needed now was to get riled up over some ancient ugliness that should never have been found.

The next day I pulled my car into the bare dirt yard in front of a small shack whose remnants of white paint were now a peeling sheet of dull gray. There were rusting metal signs nailed to the sides with just enough paint remaining to identify the

advertisers as Nehi Grape and Esso.

The inside wasn't much better off than the exterior. It was dark in there and smelled of a mixture of stale sweat, tobacco smoke, and whisky. It took several seconds for my eyes to adjust to the light. There were a few tables with mismatched chairs and a surprising number of men sitting around shooting the bull and drinking.

I had thought that places like this had disappeared years ago. I could still remember my mother telling us to walk on the other side of the road when we passed that juke-joint. She didn't want us to be influenced by getting too close to that den of iniquity where the ne'er-do-wells gathered to get drunk on bootleg liquor.

I never told her that Uncle Raymond had taken me in there when I was seven or eight and given me my first sip of beer. It had been a place of wonder where bad men who talked trash and carried knives and guns exchanged stories of their daring deeds. It had been a place that filled a small boy's innocent mind with fantasies of excitement and adventure.

Briscoe Falcon was sitting alone at the same rickety table where I remembered meeting him during my childhood. I'd known he would be there. It was

the only place in town for old men to go when they got tired of drinking at home.

'I really couldn't tell if the place had changed. I still couldn't see much better in there than I could when I was eight. The jukebox was gone, probably died of old age, and had been replaced by a vintage record player that looked as if it was as old as the building. It was playing 33 1/3 albums that produced a scratchy B. B. King.

Everybody in the place looked like they were over seventy except the bartender, whose bar was a cluster of salvaged kitchen cabinets.

Briscoe looked up at me as I helped myself to a chair at his table. He began to shake his head negatively and shoved his half empty glass toward me. He seemed to know why I was there, but I went on anyway.

"I asked Aunt Corene about Jazreen, and she went off on me."

"What'd you want to go and do that for? Boy, you crazy as hell."

"I found this over by the pipe." I dropped the earring on the table in front of him and took a sip of straight whisky from his glass.

"Hmmp," he responded uninterestedly.

"Mr. Falcon, who is Jazreen?"

"It ain't my place to tell you

about your family's business." He reached for his drink again.

"You want to tell me what that means?"

He didn't answer.

"There was a white man at Aunt Corene's when I got there—mid-thirties, red hair. She said he was a lawyer."

"I know him. Lester Flowers. He's one of them closet Ku Kluxers." He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Boy, you done stirred up some deep mess. Everything that's wrong don't need to be made right. Some things just need to be left alone."

"*Goddamn!* How can y'all sit around here listening to this *damned crap?*"

I was startled, not by the epithets but by the youthfulness of the voice that uttered them. They were followed by a harsh scratch as the needle was snatched from the record. The next sound was the reverberating thump of the bass speakers of a boom box.

"Little young-ass sonuvabitch," Briscoe muttered. "I didn't come in here to listen to that." He wrinkled his face in disgust as he spoke.

"Who's that?" I asked, perusing the young man rocking back and forth to the beat of his music with one of his friends. They appeared to be in their late teens.

"Packy's boy. He thinks 'cause

his daddy owns this little joint he can do anything he wants to do. He ain't nothing. Dropped outa school, don't work, probably sells dope."

While I was looking at the two of them, I caught Briscoe's movement from the corner of my eye as he encouraged his stiffened joints to take him over to the record player, where he started B. B. King playing again.

The young man cursed and reached for the record player, but Briscoe pushed him away and in a sweep of his hand shoved the boom box off the table, letting it crash it to the floor and silencing it.

The young man erupted with a string of obscenities and made a move as if he were going to pounce on Briscoe. I jumped out of my chair and started across the floor to stop the confrontation just as a deafening explosion shook the room and the old men, who'd seemed to have only enough energy to lift their glasses, all hit the floor like army recruits dodging incoming mortars.

Briscoe hadn't fired a warning shot. He just missed. His next shot wasn't going to miss, however, because the old .45's muzzle was only a foot from the first boy's chest. His hand had that slow, rhythmical, senile tremor, but there was nothing

wrong with his resolve. I could see his finger tightening on the trigger, and I knew I wouldn't get there in time.

"Briscoe!" I'd never called him by his first name, and maybe that caused him to hesitate for a moment.

I kicked the first boy in the crotch, and he doubled up toward the floor in time for his face to meet my knee; it jerked him upward and put him on his back.

The second boy stood there frozen, since he seemed next in line for Briscoe's bullet.

Briscoe looked at me, a bit bewildered, as if to ask what should he do now that his initial target was down.

I shrugged as if I couldn't figure it out either. "I really don't feel like this much trouble today," I said to him. "Why don't we just get the hell out of here." I reached gingerly for the gun, and he released it without resistance. As I walked past the second boy, I used it to give him a harsh crack on the back of his head, sending him sprawling.

Briscoe frowned disapprovingly at me. "You're a dirty sonuvabitch," he observed, as if completely surprised. "That what them police in Atlanta been teaching you?"

"Makes up for some of the spankings his mama didn't give him," I said. That brought a grin

to his face as we walked out to the car.

"Jazreen was your first cousin." Briscoe started talking spontaneously as we rode away from the juke-joint. He had apparently come to the conclusion that I deserved to share in whatever knowledge he had. "She was Raymond's daughter." He cut his eyes at me to see my reaction.

I was too shocked to do anything except sit there with my mouth agape.

"Raymond was screwin' this white gal. Poor white trash, lived on the other side of town over by the river. That was way before you was born. The gal got pregnant and must of lost her mind 'cause she wanted to run off with Raymond. Hell. Wan't nobody in their right mind gon' run off with no white gal back then. Plus Raymond was married, and you know Corene wan't gon' hear no mess like that. Well, the gal went off to Colored Town. They call it Rosemary now. She went to live with Elvira Smith's people. Well, she had the baby, and damned if the baby didn't look white. I guess that was all she needed. Looked like once she found out she wan't gon' have no nigger baby, she was all right. She left from down there, and ain't nobody seen her no more."

"She take the baby with her?" I asked.

"That's right. Both of 'em left town. Now, 'bout '47 or '48 there was a picture in the paper of this woman, white woman, marrying Crawford Sanderson. Her name was Jazreen Smith. Pretty gal. Looked like a Hollywood star or something. Elvira said it was that white gal's baby. Elvira was the one that named her Jazreen. We figured her mama just moved to another town and changed her name so none of her people would know where to find her."

"Who's Crawford Sanderson?"

"Oh, I forgot. You a youngster. You from Macon, and you don't really know 'bout all the old stuff that used to go on in this town. The Sanderson family was bigshots around here. They the same ones that own the paper mill. Important white folks, don't you know. Well, they says that Jazreen run off and left him after 'bout a year. That ain't what everybody says, though."

Briscoe was enjoying himself. He was stretching the story out and teasing me with it. I was mesmerized. I couldn't keep driving, so I pulled off the road at one of the state A.B.C. stores and bought Briscoe a half pint and helped him drink it right there in the parking lot.

"I heard she had a baby," he continued. "I heard that the

midwife that caught that baby said it popped out just as dark as you and me. Ain't nobody seen Jazreen since then."

"Did Uncle Raymond know who she was?"

"I don't know whether he did or not. Raymond never talked about it. I know one thing. Corene knew Raymond was screwin' that white gal, and she knew that was Raymond's baby. Don't you know Raymond had enough sense to keep his mouth shut? With all due respect to your aunt, he didn't need to get that woman on his ass. She was rough enough when she was in a good mood."

"You think Sanderson killed her?" I asked.

"Sanderson, one of his brothers, the Klan, the police—I don't see what difference it makes. Ain't nobody gon' ever do no time for it. Killin' a nigger wan't no big thing back then. When he saw that baby, he might have figured she was a nigger passing for white, or maybe she was just screwin' a nigger on the side. Hell, it would all come out to the same thing anyway."

"What happened to the baby?"

"I don't know. I don't really know none of it noway. It's just what I heard over the years. It's just stories."

I dropped Briscoe off at his sister's house, and he asked me

for his gun. I asked him if I could hold it for awhile, and he agreed. He knew I was trying to keep him from hurting somebody, and he figured I might need it more than him for the time being.

"Now, Albert Lee, don't you take my gun back to Atlanta with you. I done got too old to fight, and these young boys will kick your ass if you ain't got nothin' with you."

I shook his hand and promised to return his weapon. It wasn't just the young boys I had to worry about. Dragging up a killing could put a lot of folks over the edge.

Briscoe had told me about one thing that inexplicably needed me more than the others—the Sandersons' big wedding. That led me to the *Herald*, Roanoke Rapids' small but venerable newspaper, where I met a friendly young woman who was too blonde to have demonstrable eyebrows. She seemed more than happy to help me find an old newspaper article until I frustrated her with my lack of information—no specific dates. She finally called an older woman, who remembered that the newspaper kept a special file of major events in the town, and Crawford Sanderson's 1948 marriage was the most major event that the little town had seen in its entire history.

In less than twenty minutes I found myself staring at a picture that covered a quarter of a page of a beautiful young woman in a white wedding gown. I had no need to read the caption. I knew who the woman was instantly. The eyes and the face were hauntingly familiar. They were also frightening. I had seen her before—the figure in the pipe, something that survived even her death. My eyes were drawn to her ears. The picture wasn't sharp enough to show an inscription, but I knew. The small rounded shape was the same as the earring I had found. This woman and the bones in the creek were the same. This was Jazreen.

I ran into Isaac on the way home and stopped to talk briefly. Isaac had moved on to other things. This case wasn't very important to him, and I could understand why. It was a forty-six-year-old mystery, and how many resources was he going to invest in it to more than likely just come up empty? His concern about Aunt Corene's behavior seemed a thing of the past. Even in the unlikely event that she was responsible for Jazreen's death, what were his chances of developing a case, and what the hell could you do to an eighty-three-year-old woman anyway? I remained interested only because this was

my family and what I had seen in that pipe was more overwhelming than anything else I had encountered during my life.

The following day I drove my mother home from the hospital. She had fully recovered and was already making plans for a number of things that her doctor had completely prohibited. I learned that I should have talked to her in the first place. My dear, sweet, gossiping mother knew more of the town's dirt than a gossip columnist.

I had assumed that Crawford Sanderson was dead; after all, he was twenty years older than Jazreen when he married her. That would make him over ninety by now. My mother knew where to find him, so we made a stop at the local nursing home.

Crawford Sanderson might not have been dead, but his brain was. The man didn't know he was alive and in the world. I left him lying in bed smelling like a giant bedsore. Being rich didn't seem to make a hell of a lot of difference when you were in that shape.

There was a car parked in my mother's front yard when we got home. I recognized Lester Flowers as I came to a stop, and I knew he wasn't there to serve as a welcome home committee.

I got my mother settled in her house and returned to the car, where Flowers stood quietly on

the driver's side while his two male companions remained inside. As I approached, I pulled Briscoe's gun out of my belt and fed a round into the chamber.

Flowers flinched and drew away at the sight of the weapon. "What the hell is that for?" he asked nervously.

"Intimidation," I said.

"That ain't very friendly," one of his companions, who sat in the front passenger seat, commented. He telegraphed me one of those grins that sought to be as intimidating as my weapon.

"I ain't your goddamned friend," I retorted.

"Tell me something I don't know," the companion answered with a heavy Southern accent.

"Crawford Sanderson's as looney as a bedbug," I answered. "So who the hell else is worried about me and what I might find?"

"I told you before, you need to leave this alone," Flowers said. His face was intense as he spoke.

"Is that what these people are here for, to help you convince me to leave this alone?"

I decided the man in the front seat was the most dangerous one. He was one of those red-necks who looked like he didn't care about life—mine or his. Unlike his friend Flowers, he didn't look as if he needed to

hide behind a sheet to do his killing. The man in the back was more obscured from my vision. He sat back in his seat and away from the door. He was quiet and more removed from the activity, but I kept watching his hands to be sure he didn't make a mistake and try to make a move on me.

"There could be some money in this for you if you want to be cooperative," Flowers continued. His eyes darted nervously from my face to the gun.

The redneck just sat there staring and grinning. I knew he was thinking and waiting, and if the opportunity arose, he would probably jump me and I would have to shoot him.

"How much?" I asked.

Flowers' face suddenly looked hopeful. "Could be as much as, say, a hundred thousand dollars." He glanced toward the back seat as he stated the figure.

I stood there trying not to let my face register the shock that had just rushed through me. I stepped closer to the car. The stakes were higher than I had even considered. This couldn't be just about nigger-hating Klansmen trying to keep somebody's good name from being soiled. This was rural North Carolina, where poverty and bigotry could make life as cheap as dry grass. You could get a

black man killed for pocket change and pay for it with a postdated check. Nobody paid a hundred thousand dollars to cover up something that no one would ever be convicted of anyway. Besides, old man Sander-son didn't have enough brain cells left to know whether he was being defamed or not.

I saw the gleam in the redneck's eye and realized that I'd made a mistake, but it was too late. He shoved the passenger door open. It slammed into my legs and upper body, knocking me backwards to the ground. His tall, lanky frame was on top of me before I could scramble to my feet. I rammed my left forearm into his Adam's apple and jammed the muzzle of the .45 into his mouth. Blood splattered across my face as I felt it crunch through his teeth, and he rolled away yelping like a hit dog.

My adrenaline jerked me to my feet, and I trained the gun on the back seat of the car. It was a lesson learned from long ago—eliminate the most viable threat. The redneck was already down. If I popped the guy in the back seat, then did the redneck, all I would have to worry about was Flowers, who was standing there white as a sheet with his hands on the roof of the car looking like he was going to piss on himself any minute.

"Stop it! Y'all quit that! Quit it right now! You hear me?"

My mother had come out on the front porch, and for some reason her presence and her voice put everything in a state of suspension.

"Go on back in the house, Mama. This ain't got nothing to do with you," I yelled.

"Albert Lee, I'm your mother, and you don't talk to me like that! You don't tell me what to do!"

I wanted to say, "Yes, ma'am," but I was embarrassed so I didn't say anything. I just stood there holding the gun, and nobody else moved or spoke.

She stepped down from the front porch and came a bit closer. I could see her craning her neck to see who was inside the car.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Sanderson," she addressed the man in the car.

The rear door opened, and a man slightly older than me stepped out. He wore a white dress shirt without a tie and with the sleeves rolled up. He didn't return her greeting.

My mother walked closer and stood next to me.

"Albert Lee, you should put that gun up. I don't think anyone wants to lose his life over this. You might want to hurt somebody, but you really shouldn't."

The redneck had crawled back to the car and was leaning against it holding his mouth, so I eased the gun into my belt.

"The trouble with growing up in a place where there is so much hate is you end up giving back as much as you receive because it's the hate that helps you survive. I didn't want to raise my boy down here in this segregated, separate-but-equal, Klan-infested place, but I didn't have a choice. This is where my husband lived and worked. My child grew up thinking that half of all the people in his world hated him, and even though he's gone on to see a better side, he can't get away from it. He would have killed all of y'all and ruined his own life, and he doesn't even understand why it would have been so easy for him."

She was in her schoolteacher mode, and we all stood there almost as if in some surrealistic dream, listening respectfully. It had to do with Southern upbringing and respecting older people. No matter how mad you got, there were some things you didn't do in front of your mother or older women.

"This is Mr. Harold Sanderson. In a better world you and my boy might have known each other, Mr. Sanderson. Might have been friends. But it's not a better world, and my boy thinks

your daddy's first wife, Jazreen Smith, was killed by him or somebody he paid because he couldn't stand to have been fooled into marrying a colored woman. You know, my son used to talk to me when he was younger, but now he thinks I'm just an old woman whose mind isn't as good as it used to be. I could have told him that Crawford Sanderson didn't kill anybody."

"What do you know about this, Mama?" I asked. I was almost to ashamed to ask her anything now because she was right. I hadn't gone to her, and it wasn't just her illness. I just didn't think my mother knew about things like this.

"Jazreen was a pretty woman. I don't know who she got her looks from, but it certainly wasn't your Uncle Raymond. You see, the only folks who didn't know that Jazreen wasn't white were the white folks. Mr. Sanderson didn't suspect anything himself until the baby came out darkskinned. Then he thought he could keep her and keep it hidden. He made the midwife take that baby and give it away. Do any of you know how hard it is to have your flesh and blood taken away from you? Do you know how she must have felt to be forced to give up her baby?"

Still nobody said anything.

She turned to look directly at me.

"She left Crawford Sanderson. I don't think he ever knew where she went. White folks didn't wander through our neighborhoods looking for anything. She stayed over there with Mattie Pierce for a while. Then one day she left and didn't come back. Maybe you need to stop worrying about whether the white folks killed Jazreen, Albert. Maybe nobody did anything to her other than what was already done. Maybe she killed herself. Maybe she took some poison and walked back in the woods by that old creekbed and lay down and died."

"Then what is this about? What are they afraid of? That man just offered me a hundred thousand dollars to leave this alone."

She paused and looked at Flowers for a long time. It made him uncomfortable, and he fidgeted and looked at Sanderson.

"I wonder what happened to Jazreen's baby. He'd be forty-something by now." She said it in a slow, speculative manner, and Sanderson's reddened face told me she was right on the money. The old man was on his last leg. He couldn't live much longer. The paper mill, the entire pulp industry that he had nurtured, was probably worth a considerable amount of money,

and his son by his second wife certainly didn't need to have black men coming out of the woodwork claiming to be his long-lost stepbrother and trying to share the wealth. This was 1994, and the courts wouldn't be inclined to dismiss such a claim as they would have forty years ago.

"Nobody's ever going to be able to figure out who he is," Sanderson finally said. "What are we going to do, DNA analysis on every black man in Halifax County who thinks there's a possibility he could be my father's missing son? Where does it stop? He could be anywhere. He could have moved away to another state. Then what do we do, go from state to state doing blood tests on black men? When the word gets out about how much money my father's estate is worth, they're going to come in here like a horde of locusts."

"He's probably right, Albert. Everybody who had anything to do with it is either dead or so old their minds are in the same shape as Crawford Sanderson's. It might be best for everybody to just leave this whole thing alone."

My mother coaxed me back toward the porch, and Sanderson, Flowers, and the redneck got back in their car and backed out to the road. I think we were all

grateful to have extricated ourselves from this confrontation.

I thought about what my mother had said for a long time. It wasn't as complete an answer as I wanted, but it did make a certain sense. Jazreen's bones hadn't been truly buried, just covered with a layer of silt and dirt that had accumulated over the years. I don't know why she went to the creekbed; maybe just because it was peaceful there. Poisoned animals always seem to seek water. Maybe that was a part of it, too.

I went back and stood by the place where I'd found the bones. I had the feeling that she was still there in some form, but I never saw her again.

My mother had one of those *one last chores* for me to do before going back to Atlanta. She sent me down to a little town called Scotland Neck, about forty miles east of Macon, to have a mechanic service her twenty-year-old car that had only been driven thirty thousand miles on weekly excursions. It was one of those things. I found it easier to go through the motions of doing rather than trying to talk her out of it. When I arrived at the service station, I knew instantly why she had sent me. A very light-skinned black man in his forties shook my hand and laughed when he saw her car. He con-

fessed that he didn't know why she always drove all the way to Scotland Neck to get her oil changed. Maybe he didn't, but I did. I introduced myself, and we spent a long time talking about who he was, who I was, and who I thought he was. I was surprised at the curious discovery that my mother was a closet militant. She didn't want a gunfight in her front yard, but she wasn't about to let Harold Sanderson keep his family fortune all to himself.

Briscoe Falcon couldn't stop laughing when I returned his gun and told him the story.

"Lord have mercy. Whatever

is Mr. Harold Sanderson gon' do with his new-found big brother, not even to mention the rest of y'all cousins and all?"

"I can't say, but you call me up and let me know. I'm going back to Atlanta."

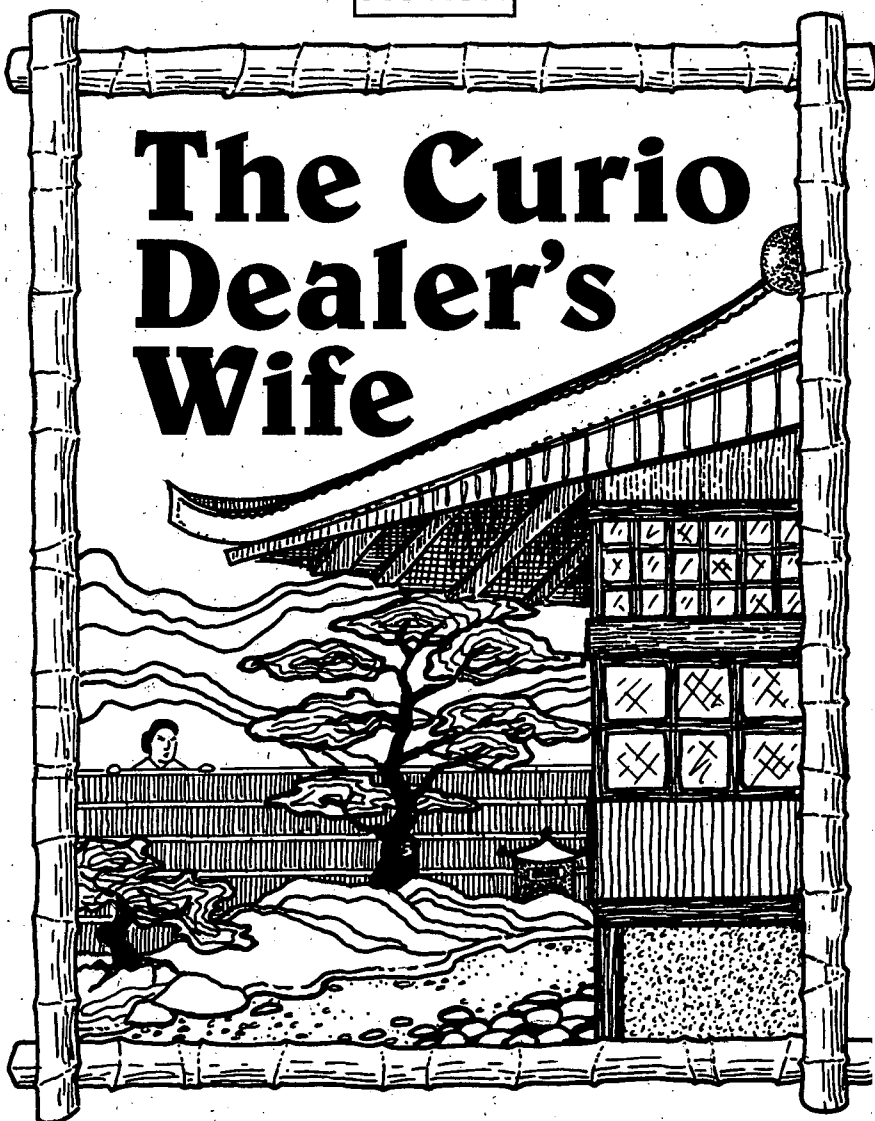
Blood and color had always been mixed up in the South. It was all a matter of who had the upper hand and who was in control of doing the acknowledging. The farther I got away from Roanoke Rapids, the less I felt of Jazreen's presence. Maybe it was just because her life, that part of it that lived in her child, was taking its intended course, and she was finally at peace.

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FICTION

The Curio Dealer's Wife



I. J. Parker

Illustration by Laurie Davis

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Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 11/97

HIEIAN-KYO (KYOTO), ELEVENTH CENTURY JAPAN, FROST MONTH (DECEMBER).

Sugawara Akitada was on his way to the curio store when he saw her. The woman was standing on a stone at the corner of the substantial and well-kept Hamada property, peering over the fence into the narrow garden beside the house.

It was not this fact which made him pause. Many hungry beggars checked out the premises of prosperous merchants in search of a friendly servant. This woman, who was no longer young, was dressed poorly for this chilly season. Her clothing was of the cheapest faded cotton, and she wore mended straw sandals on her bare feet. But there was a certain cleanliness about her, and her silver-streaked hair had been pinned up with great care. Also, her thin figure was very straight and her bare arms and hands graceful. None of these things were common among female beggars. Besides, Akitada thought, there was something familiar about her hairstyle and the way she held her shapely head.

He approached and startled her. She stepped down from the stone quickly but then relaxed.

"Forgive me," said Akitada, inclining his head politely. "For a moment I thought I recognized you."

Her face was slender, lined by age or anxiety, the eyes lustrous as if moistened by unshed tears, and her lips were compressed firmly. Akitada thought she looked like someone who held in pain by sheer force of will.

She averted her face. "Possibly," she said softly and brushed past him.

The voice reminded him of the woman's name. It was deep for a woman and had a lovely resonance.

"Mrs. Hamada!" Akitada cried. "Wait! You are Mrs. Hamada, aren't you?"

She stopped without turning; just stood there, perfectly still and straight, waiting.

He walked to her, faced her, and bowed again. "My name is Sugawara. I am with the Ministry of Justice, and I visited your fine store quite often in the past. Once you waited on me. I was buying a flute."

As he spoke, his eyes fell to her clothing, her straw-sandaled feet. The prosperous merchant's wife he recalled had worn plain but costly silk gowns and silk stockings.

"I am no longer Mrs. Hamada," she said.

Thoughts raced through Akitada's mind. He vaguely remembered hearing that the curio dealer Hamada had left for a business trip to China or Korea. But that had been years ago. Had he died? Had she remarried and fallen on hard times? Who owned the store now? There had been small children, boys who would have inherited.

"I am sorry. You lost your husband then?" he asked.

"In a manner of speaking," she said, and glanced back at the store with a look of anger and longing. "The man who returned from China is not my husband, and he has taken my home and my children."

Akitada, taken aback but curious, and touched by her distress, took her to a small restaurant nearby and ordered bowls of noodle soup for both of them. She accepted the invitation with a quiet grace and ate hungrily but with great neatness. When she was done, she lowered her bowl, laid aside her chopsticks, and bowed deeply to him.

"You are very good," she said with a little catch in her voice. "I cannot remember when I ate last."

"You have no money?"

"Neither money nor home. When I realized that he was an impostor, I accused him. The charge was heard in court. I lost. The moment the judge confirmed his identity, he turned to me and pronounced the words of divorce. Right there in court in front of everyone. When I got home, the doors were barred to me. In a moment, I lost everything—my children, my home, my clothes, everything."

"But how do you live?"

"Oh," she said quickly, "I have been sleeping at the Charity Hospital. I give them a hand sometimes, and they tolerate me. The clothes I wore to the trial I traded for these and used the extra money to pay clerks to draw up petitions to the court to reopen the case. They have been rejected."

"How long have you been without a home?"

"Six months. I have only seen my children twice. When you saw me, I was trying to look for them in the garden. I go every day. Usually his servants chase me away."

Silence fell as Akitada considered her extraordinary tale. It was not plausible! The man who had returned must have been recognized by neighbors, servants, friends, customers. The municipal judge would have investigated and heard witnesses before finding against her. Was she mad? He began to regret having told her his name and occupation.

Mrs. Hamada's hands twitched. He could see now that they were work-worn, the nails chipped and broken. "I must go," she whispered. "Unless . . ." She gave a small gasp. "The Ministry of Justice," she cried. "You work for the Ministry of Justice, sir? Oh, sir, do you know of something else I might try?"

Actually Akitada's predicament was not without humor. His success as a solver of mysteries and crimes had gained him a certain reputation among the noble families and government officials, but clearly it had not reached this strange woman. She merely hoped for legal advice.

"Tell me," he said, "why no one else has suspected that the man was not who he claimed to be."

"My husband . . . or . . . this man spent four years traveling and buying goods. On his return journey he was shipwrecked off the coast of Tsushima Island, caught the smallpox there, and almost died. It was another year before he could hide away on a fishing boat and return to Japan."

"But five years is not very long," said Akitada dubiously.

"The man who claimed to be my husband is very like him, except . . . the smallpox has scarred his face terribly. And he limps on the same leg my husband did."

"What about his hair? His voice? Height? Mannerisms?"

"They were close enough. And he knew things, I don't know how, but he knew all about the shop and the children, even his mother's favorite story."

"His mother is alive? What does she say?"

"Mother is nearly blind and hard of hearing. She was overjoyed when he returned. Besides even I, at first . . ." She flushed crimson and whispered, "I wanted to believe. But a wife knows."

Akitada made up his mind. He paid for the food and told her, "Be near the store tomorrow at the same time. I must check out some things."

He went back to the curio store first. Hamada's was the largest and best of its kind in the capital and carried not only a variety of fine games and musical instruments, but also children's toys. Today was a special day in Akitada's family. His son, having turned three this year, would be putting on his first pair of trousers on this day. The soothsayer had been consulted, the day pronounced auspicious for the ceremony, the boy's mother, grandmother, and aunts were arranging an elaborate family feast, and Akitada had been on his way to buy his son a present when he

had encountered Mrs. Hamada peering over the fence for a glimpse of her own sons.

The store bustled with customers. A loud-voiced, barrel-chested man with a horribly scarred face—no doubt the alleged Hamada—had joined his assistants to wait on clients. Akitada was greeted by a very young salesman with a timid manner, and he asked to see some toys suitable for a small boy.

While he waited, he studied the curio dealer surreptitiously. He did not recall Hamada from earlier visits, never having been an important enough customer to get the personal attention of the owner. The smallpox had left thick scar tissue and holes in the man's cheeks and chin and had distorted his nose and lips. In every other respect he was of ordinary appearance, middle-sized, broad-shouldered, thickened about the waist, his hair heavy and straight and neatly tied up. His voice, too, though strong, was ordinary, and his speech that of any city merchant. More significantly, he seemed to know his merchandise.

"Are any of these what the gentleman was looking for?" The shy young man was pointing to an assortment of balls, sticks, shuttlecocks, and kites. "For a boy who is active?" he added with a little smile.

Akitada smiled back. Oh yes. His boy was very active. A football? He had always enjoyed that himself. But perhaps three was a little young. Stilts? No. Too soon. A painted *giccho* ball with its curved stick? The little fellow could manage that well enough, and it would teach him agility. On second thought, though, the noise of a large wooden ball rolling about the wooden corridors of his home all day long might not be desirable. Kites in winter? Hardly. Akitada sighed. "It is not a good time of year for outdoor sports," he said to the young salesman.

"How about a spinning top, then?" boomed a voice behind him.

Akitada turned and recoiled. A demon's face was grimacing hideously at him, wide purple lips drawn back to bare crooked yellow teeth. The man who called himself Hamada was taking an interest in a sale! No doubt this ghastly expression was a smile. Akitada controlled a strong sense of revulsion and nodded pleasantly, "Yes, perhaps. Thank you for the suggestion."

"We have a very fine one," continued the curio dealer, "large and painted with dragons in many colors. Children love the way the colors mingle when it spins. Get it, Noro!" The young assistant bowed, and ran. "Idiot!" growled the dealer.

"What?" asked Akitada startled.

"That boy who waited on you. He's an idiot, and lazy. Don't know why I took him on as an apprentice. His father couldn't pay me enough to put up with such a slow fool. Have to lay into him with the bamboo almost every day."

"I thought he was very helpful."

The apprentice, out of breath and with beads of perspiration on his brow, returned with the magnificent top.

"Well?" thundered the curio dealer, glaring at the unfortunate youngster. "Are you just going to stand there? Show the gentleman how the thing works!"

"Yes, sir," the apprentice whispered. With trembling fingers he wound a string about the top and attempted to spin it. But in his nervousness, he let the top scoot off to disappear in the folds of a customer's full trousers.

Hamada's face darkened with fury. He raised a fist.

Akitada said quickly, "It is the perfect gift, Mr. Hamada. Please have the young man wrap it for me." While he waited for the toy to be retrieved, his eye fell on a zither a customer was strumming. "Do you still have your father's Chinese lutes?" he asked the curio dealer.

The man swelled with pride. "Of course. Our family treasure! Would you care to see them, sir?"

"I am in a hurry today, but I know someone who would be very eager to see them. He is a collector of rare instruments."

Hamada's eyes narrowed. He rubbed his hands. "A collector you say? It so happens I might put them on the market. The expense of a growing family, you understand."

"Then perhaps I might return tomorrow at this time with my friend?"

"Of course, of course! It would give me the greatest pleasure." The dealer bowed Akitada out of the store with many expressions of delight.

From Hamada's, Akitada went directly to the Imperial Office for Court Music and chatted about Chinese lutes with the retired court musician Tamemori. Afterwards he paid a visit to the municipal police headquarters and asked to speak to Captain Abe. This meeting was difficult. A number of years ago, Akitada had solved a particularly complicated series of murders on the grounds of the Imperial University, and this embarrassment had not made Abe very fond of him. In fact, the police captain considered Akitada a mere dilet-

tante, a meddler in things that did not concern him. It took all of Akitada's persuasive powers, therefore, before Abe agreed to his plan.

The following day, shortly after the noon hour, three very important-looking personages entered Hamada's store. Akitada, in official silk robe and black cap led the way. Behind him came an elderly man, venerable with his white hair and beard, in a gorgeous brocade robe and a tall, middle-aged gentleman in semiformal court dress with a very superior scowl on his stern face.

The young salesman recognized Akitada immediately.

"This way, Your Honor!" he cried, bowing deeply and leading them to the back of the store. "Mr. Hamada is expecting Your Honor and the noble gentlemen."

Hamada awaited them in his private quarters, a small, luxuriously matted room behind the public sales area. He knelt immediately and bowed his head to the floor. On a low table next to him rested three ancient musical instruments resembling zithers. The three men approached and looked at them.

"Cushions!" hissed Hamada to his apprentice, and cushions appeared immediately.

They seated themselves, and Hamada sat up. "I understand there is an interest in these rare instruments," he said rubbing his large square hands nervously and looking at Akitada's companions. "My father's Chinese lutes are three of only five authentic ones in this country. The other two are owned by His Majesty. Nothing else in this humble shop approaches them in rarity. How may I be of service to Your Excellencies?"

"Thank you for letting us see your treasures, Mr. Hamada," said Akitada. "This is Counselor Tamemori, and the other gentleman is Captain Abe, a special friend of mine."

Hamada bowed deeply to all of them.

Abe leaned forward and poked one of the lutes with a long finger. "Don't look like any lutes I ever saw," he commented.

Hamada said quickly, "Chinese lutes are different in design from Japanese ones," and turned his attention to the elderly man.

"I assume," said Akitada to the curio dealer, "that your father told you all about the provenance of these instruments."

Hamada smiled. "Certainly. My father was extremely proud of these and made sure that I understood their value and everything about them."

"Can you play them?" asked the whitehaired Tamemori, caressing one of the lutes and touching the silk strings.

"I am afraid I have no musical talent," said Hamada. "But my ancient mother used to perform a little. My father taught her the technique. Excuse me a moment."

Hamada left the room.

"Well?" asked Akitada, looking at Tamemori.

The old man nodded. "I think you are right. The instruments are authentic, but they should have been oiled, and the silk restrung. These lutes will not play in their present condition and may already be damaged by the neglect."

Abe said grimly, "Well, we'll see soon enough. If you're right, I would not want to be in his shoes. He will have to explain a number of very suspicious circumstances."

Akitada raised his brows. "You surprise me. In your office yesterday you acted as if my suggestion were mad."

Abe flushed. "You have a way of meddling in police investigations. Briefly then: when his wife brought charges, we checked. He carried the real Hamada's travel documents and told a convincing story, but I thought privately that he was vague about the places he had visited. By a coincidence, shortly before this Hamada appeared in town we caught a bandit who claimed that a gang was operating between here and Naniwa on the coast. The gang specializes in robbing merchants traveling between the capital and the port city. The prisoner claimed that the gang had been selling off Chinese imports, painted scrolls, jade carvings, fine porcelain jars, and so forth." He paused, then added heavily, "If they caught the real Hamada on his return from China and if one of the gang members decided to impersonate him, the man must be dead." He broke off when the door opened.

Hamada was leading an ancient woman in a black silk gown. She was bent almost double and was nearly bald. Guiding her to the table, he said loudly, "Mother! These are three noble persons who wish to hear you play Father's lutes."

"What?" she said, peering at the visitors nearsightedly. "Lutes, did you say? My fingers are much too stiff." She lowered herself painfully onto a cushion and, muttering to herself, handled all three lutes, one after the other.

"Do the lutes have names?" Akitada asked Hamada.

The curio dealer hesitated just a moment, then said, "Yes, of course. All famous lutes do."

"Well, what are they?" snapped Abe.

"Hmm. This large one here is called Singing Breeze, the one next to it Temple Bells, and the small one Cricket."

"What did you say?" asked Tamemori, leaning his white head forward and putting a hand to his ear.

"They are called Temple Bells, Singing Breeze, and Cricket," repeated Hamada loudly.

The old woman raised her head. "What?" she asked sharply. "What is called Cricket?"

"Never mind, Mother. Tell these gentlemen how you used to play."

"I used to know the song 'Dancing with the Blue Phoenix.'" She stroked the strings of the lute Hamada had called Temple Bells. "Singing Bell needs new strings. Why doesn't it have new strings?"

Hamada looked apologetically at his visitors. "I'm afraid my mother is very old. Her mind wanders. Of course everyone knows that it is wrong to replace any part of an antique. It destroys its value."

Tamemori said, "It is very disappointing. I had my heart set on seeing the proper touch demonstrated. It is not necessary to play a tune. Could your mother just show us how she plucks the strings?"

The old woman stared at Tamemori. "You're old. Did you hear me when I played Singing Bell?" she asked in a quavering voice. "I played for the Crown Prince. Were you there?"

"Come, Mother!" said Hamada in a peremptory tone. "Time to go back to your room." He tried to lift her to her feet, but she slapped aside his hands.

"Singing Bell," she cried, "not Temple Bells. You know it is Singing Bell. And the strings are old, and you have not oiled the wood. Your father used to take such care of the lutes." She burst into tears, and Hamada led her out.

The three men looked at each other.

"Well, are you satisfied?" Akitada asked Abe.

The police captain nodded, rose, and went out. When he returned, he was accompanied by the younger Mrs. Hamada, who took one look at the lutes and cried out, "Oh, they must be oiled right away. My husband and I always oiled the lutes three times a year."

Hamada, coming in, shouted, "Who let this woman in? She has no right to be here."

"On the contrary," said Akitada, "it is you who have no right here. The real Hamada would have known all about his treasured lutes

and cared for them properly. Counselor Tamemori here oversees the treasures in the Imperial Music Office. He is an expert on the care of Chinese instruments. And Captain Abe is superintendent of the municipal police. He has some questions about the kidnapping and murder of the real Hamada near Naniwa."

The curio dealer's disfigured face blanched a pasty white, and he fell to his knees.

"Then my husband is dead?" whispered Mrs. Hamada.

A heavy silence fell.

Suddenly there was the sound of young voices outside the room, and she turned towards it, deep joy suffusing a face wet with tears.

SOLUTION TO THE OCTOBER "UNSOLVED":

Del Baker, the saloon keeper, lied when he said Enderly was already outside before Alexander and Cobb emerged. This is refuted by statements made by the other four suspects, who agree that the sequence of appearance was Alexander, Dundee, Cobb, and Enderly. Significantly, none of the four mentioned seeing Baker at all. He was busy hiding the gold under floorboards in his kitchen, where Sheriff Ryder found it.

OWNER	BUSINESS	HOUSE COLOR
Bert Dundee	hardware store	red
Del Baker	saloon	orange
Jonathan Rockford	bank	yellow
Chuck Alexander	hotel	white
Abe Enderly	grocery	green
Edgar Cobb	blacksmith	blue

(from west to east)

FICTION

The Microdot Puzzle

Arthur Porges



Illustration by Ray Basham

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG by Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 11/97

ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

“One miserable microdot, smaller than a pinhead, in a cluttered apartment—it seems hopeless. No,” Detective Lieutenant Rodgers added glumly, “it is hopeless. We could set ten people to searching the place, but without a clue to its location, there wouldn’t be a chance in hell of finding it in time to be of much use to the State Department. And it doesn’t help that Margaret Gary isn’t a pro, just a friend of the family. The real agent, Terry Moran, was arrested by the secret police in Iraq and barely had time to slip the microdot to Mrs. Gary. Damned lucky she wasn’t grabbed, too.”

The woman in the armchair, Elizabeth—Betty—Buffington Blake, once a math professor thoroughly trained by Oxford and MIT, both institutions sure they were dealing with a near-genius, and now a scientific consultant to a variety of police departments, nodded sympathetically. Because she initialed her reports B3, her friends called her “B-Cubed,” which well suited her math background. She was a tall, even lanky woman who looked a bit like Attorney General Janet Reno except for a plumper, prettier face that made her look quite girlish, much younger than her forty-seven years.

“What’s on the microdot?” she inquired.

“The locations of Iraq’s secret stash of nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons, obviously of great value to our defense establishment. Mrs. Gary got it to her apartment and hastily hid it, we infer, because Moran had warned her an attempt would surely be made to take it from her. And that’s exactly what happened. She scribbled a clue of some sort on the desk blotter and left, headed, we suppose, to a meeting with somebody from State. She was smart enough not to carry the dot lest she be intercepted by the Iraqi hit man. Sadly, she was right. He caught her on the stairs, stabbed her very professionally under the ribs to the heart, and no doubt would have gone up to ransack her apartment except that a couple of kids who were cuddling in the corridor saw the killing and screamed so he had to run.”

“But she did leave a clue, you said.”

“You might call it that, but it’s useless.”

“Well, what was it?” B-Cubed asked with a hint of impatience.

“The word ‘Lolo.’ She must have meant ‘Lola,’ a woman’s name, but if there’s a Lola in Moran’s life or hers, we can’t find her.”

B-Cubed was silent for a moment, her gaze hooded, then she said thoughtfully, “One microdot in an apartment full of clutter and a written word, Lolo. Well now. How many rooms?”

"Three—four—I'm not sure how they're counted. Living room, bedroom, bath, tiny kitchen."

"It does present difficulties," she admitted.

"That's a wild understatement. I'm not sure you or anybody else can help. As I said, impossible."

"Could be, but I can at least take a look at the apartment. Are you free right now to take me there?"

"You bet!" he exclaimed, a glint of hope in his eyes. He had an almost mystical faith in her very special talents. When B-Cubed activated what she called her "Theater of the Mind," a highly imaginative combination of brainstorming and the visualization of various speculations about a given puzzle—in this case hide-and-seek plus espionage and assassination—she had a unique ability to make plausible inferences typical of scientific research at its best.

The Gary residence was packed with books, hundreds of them in riotous disorder on every surface. They were of all sizes, colors, formats, and states of decrepitude. B-Cubed noted several encyclopedias, including a *Britannica* and the wonderful old *Century Dictionary and Cyclopedia* in ten big volumes. It was almost dwarfed by a huge atlas, big enough to serve as a table for a sizable buffet spread.

"I'd say the poor woman was literate," she said dryly but with an undercurrent of sadness.

"I know what you're thinking," Rodgers said. "What better place to hide a microdot and yet record a simple way to find it. In a dictionary, say at the word 'Lolo'—except there's no such English word. Nor are proper names like Lola listed."

"There must be plenty of novels with women of almost any name."

"Yes, but who would know which novel? Besides, if there's a Lola in some novel, her name would appear often. Which appearance would have the microdot?"

"I agree," she said. "It's all too vague and complicated. Mrs. Gary wouldn't have gone that route; too intelligent a woman, obviously. We need something basically simple and unambiguous, a location very specific and direct, one we can go straight to in moments."

"So—"

"A book," she murmured. "I'd say the odds are very much in favor of a book. The Book of Lolo," she added almost to herself. Once again she surveyed the hundreds of volumes and shook her head as if to confirm the detective's "impossible" verdict.

"Take me home," she said. "I'll work on it. The solution has to be basically simple, even obvious if one gets pointed right. I'll work on it immediately, and if I come up with anything—don't get your hopes too high; on this one I haven't an inkling—I'll call you at once."

Back home, she stretched herself out on a large, well-worn couch, closed her eyes, and activated her Theater of the Mind. The clock, a seven foot tall antique, ticked loudly in the silent room. But after almost an hour her little mental stage remained depressingly barren. No miniature mime troupe appeared to explain in dumb-show what was meant by that cryptic pair, Lolo and the book. B-Cubed sighed, rose, went to her blender, and mixed a drink regarded as bizarre by her friends: it combined a slightly overripe banana, a mango, wheat germ, honey, yogurt, and most weird, a dash of red pepper. Sipping this concoction with relish, she let her eyes roam the immaculate room. Lackadaisically she picked up the morning *Herald* and scanned it. A subheadline caught her attention briefly: "RECORD ZERO DEGREES IN ATLANTA."

"Lolo," she muttered. Why the letter *o*? Why not a number, zero? Did that lead to anything? "L zero," she said. "L zero." Her mind went back to Mrs. Gary's desk and the enormous atlas. "Oh my!" she exclaimed, her expression one of sheer delight. Hastily she went to her bookcase, taking out a large, thick volume. Ten minutes later, smiling broadly, she phoned Rodgers, who had returned to Mrs. Gary's apartment.

The moment he heard her voice, catching the lilt that implied deep satisfaction, he demanded eagerly, "Whatcha got, B-Cubed?—I can tell you're really wired. Something, I hope, to freak out State, the CIA, the FBI, and all the other Foggy Bottom clowns. They're all so damned superior and supercilious. They'd love to freeze me out of the investigation, but there is a murder involved after all, and on my territory."

"Slow down," she admonished him genially. "There are no guarantees, but unless I'm crazy, you will indeed clean their institutional clocks."

Then she added with a fruity, melodious chuckle, "'Beware the Bight of Benin!'"

There was a dead silence followed by a gargling, "Wha-a-a? Run that by me again. Is there a dog, or maybe the new pet craze, a ferret, in our riddle?"

"No, Tom. It's B-i-g-h-t, not bite as in dog. And who would name any pet Benin? Meaningless to the great unwashed!"

"Then explain, dammit!"

"Go get that enormous atlas. Find the position—the only global, geographical nowhere—at latitude zero and longitude zero. It's in the Gulf of Guinea, near the Bight of Benin, and unless I miss my guess, that's where she stuck the microdot. Use that nice Coddington lens you carry, and take a look while I hold my breath."

He left the phone but came back shortly with a lilt in his voice, too, as he said, "Bull's-eye—it was there! I say bless the Bight of Benin and the gallant Margaret Gary."

"You know," she said slowly, almost to herself, "I've no idea, really, why people were warned about the bight, which is just a peculiarly curved coastline of West Africa. My brain, in the spaces between arrays of scientific data, is apparently crammed with bits of useless information—facts I can't help remembering but don't need and might be better off forgetting; just pointless clutter. Anyhow, the moment I spotted that notation on the world map, my subconscious blurted out, so to speak, 'Beware the Bight of Benin!' But why? I do seem to recall reading years ago that the town of that name was notorious for all sorts of nasty stuff—human sacrifice, piracy, slavery, and similar horrors. That would explain why Europeans were warned to keep well clear of the Gulf of Guinea and that part of the African continent. But I'll have to surf the Internet and find out for sure."

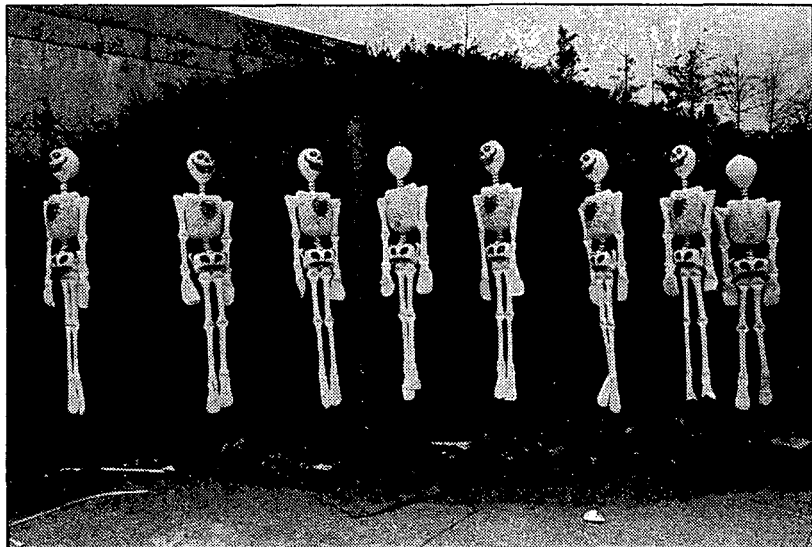
"It seems to me," the detective said, "that one major puzzle a day ought to be enough; you deserve a long break. If you overdo it, you might run out of plausible inferences!"

"Good advice, Tom, but sorry—if I don't get the explanation, I won't sleep tonight."

"Bitten by the Bight," he quipped. "Well, good luck, and many thanks."

"You're very welcome," said B-Cubed.

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



Henri Silberman, N.Y.C.

Enough for a square dance. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, 1270 Avenue of the Americas, New York, New York 10020. Please label your entry "November Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

The winning entry for the May Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 157.

FICTION

MILE ZERO

David
Edgerley Gates

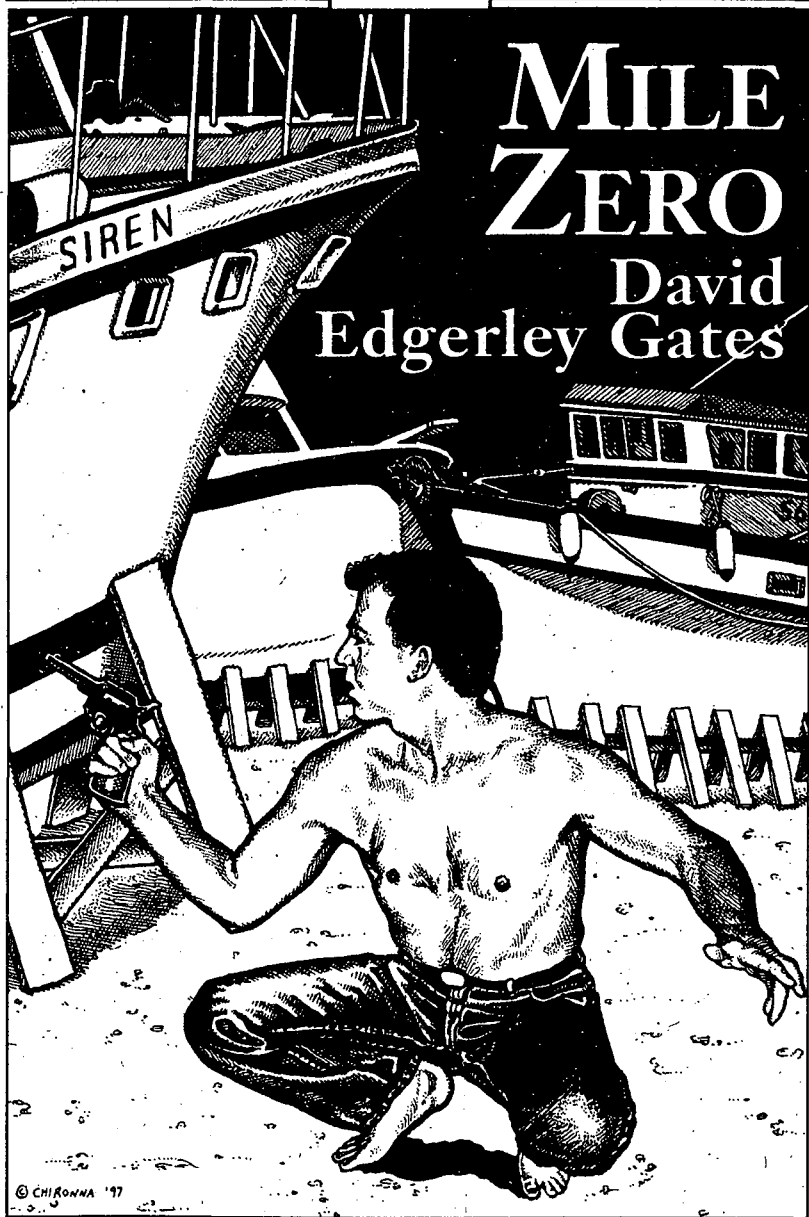


Illustration by Ron Chironna

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 11/97

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They'd hauled *Siren* out of the water at midday, and now she sat on a cradle in the boatyard, high and dry and looking somewhat the worse for wear, her hull stained with rust and algae. Her superstructure loomed top-heavy overhead, ungainly as a dowager sitting on a children's swing set, trailing her muddy skirts behind her.

He'd fouled one of the props on a coral head and bent the drive shaft, and there was no way he could fix it alone, adrift in the Florida Straits. It was one of those things that couldn't be helped. He was all by himself on this trip, a long way off his usual graze, some hundred nautical miles southwest of Bimini on a reach beyond Elbow Cay. Cuba was the closest port of call if you wanted to take your chances with Castro's coastal patrols, trying to explain you needed emergency repairs, but he wasn't in the mood to be quarantined in Havana harbor, waiting for parts from the mainland. He feathered the starboard prop and limped into Key West.

Keeler wasn't all that crazy about Key West. It was too honkytonk for his taste, crowded and shrill and cluttered with tourist traps, gift shops and organic restaurants and artsy galleries, saloons swanked up with brass fixtures and blond wood and hanging plants, overdone

with glitter and rouge. There was a heavy party scene and a lot of recreational drugs floating around, Quaaludes and cocaine, amyl nitrates and Ecstasy, although there was less frantic urgency and abandon than there had been in the days before AIDS when the sidewalks outside the dance bars were littered with used poppers every night after last call and chickenhawks cruised the younger crowd like predators circling wounded game.

He ducked into a conch bar off Duval and ordered a Red Stripe while he looked at the menu on the chalkboard. It was a local joint, and the local crowd didn't pay him any mind. Keeler didn't look out of place in his scruffy sneakers and jeans, the sunburn and the permanent squint from looking over long distances of open water. He could smell the smoke from an open pit out back, and asked the bartender for barbecue on a bun and another beer. The bartender looked like a college kid, wearing cutoffs and a T-shirt advertising a gin joint called the Green Parrot. The back of the T-shirt read SEE THE LOWER KEYS ON YOUR HANDS & KNEES. A few more Red Stripes and Keeler figured he'd be doing just that.

He had a third round with his sandwich, though. It was good barbecue, charred and spicy. He

finished it off and paid his tab, and went out into the street again. It was a hot afternoon, heavy and humid, and the beers had made Keeler drowsy. He stopped at a coffee stall down the block and had a cup of that thick Cuban coffee, with the sugar brewed in. The buzz off the coffee gave him the nervous sweats. He bought some groceries and headed back to the marina to check on his boat.

The conch who ran the boatyard was a contrary bastard, which didn't help matters. Keeler didn't want to get into a big tangle with the guy, but he wanted his boat back in the water. Key West was the end of the line, the place where you ran out of road, Mile Zero, and the less time he was stuck here, the better. He'd been working the waters off the Great Bahama Bank for eighteen years now, going through two wives in the process. He was sorry about Daphne and Veronica, but it didn't keep him awake nights. What made him itchy was not having the boat under his feet, not being able to turn her bow toward some empty point of the compass and shed his skin like a snake. You'd think a man who made his living from repairing boats would understand a thing like that, but the yardmaster wouldn't cut him any slack. The

yardmaster called himself Cope. Keeler wasn't comforted.

"The prop, the hardware, I got in stock," Cope was telling him. "The shaft, you might be up the creek there. I can't heat it up without I weaken the temper, so you got to factor in the price of a new, and air freight from Marathon's gonna cost you. I already faxed them the specs."

"Do the best you can for me," Keeler said mildly. "The longer the boat's out of the water, the more I stand to lose by it. I don't want to be choking my chicken the better part of a week."

Cope snorted. "Well, get your gear off the boat," he said. "Whatever you're gonna need to bunk in town. The rest of it's safe enough."

Keeler shook his head. "I'm spending my nights on the boat," he told Cope. "It's not safety so much. I wouldn't be comfortable in a rented room."

The marina owner took a deep breath and let it out slowly, holding onto his temper. "You can't spend the night on the boat," he said. "This yard's locked up tighter'n a drum after dark, and I turn my dogs loose inside the fence."

"That's no problem," Keeler said. "I'm not leaving the boat. I've got everything I need aboard."

"You seen them two dogs?" Cope demanded. "Rottweilers.

You climb down off that boat in the middle of the night, they might tear your face off. I can't afford the aggravation."

"You don't have to worry I'll be breaking into somebody else's boat then," Keeler pointed out.

"I don't like it," Cope said. "Anyway, my insurance don't cover it. Something happens, you set yourself on fire, say, where does that leave me? I'd be negligent, company'd never pay off on the bond."

"I snuck in," Keeler said. "You didn't know about it."

Cope turned away, and swung back abruptly. "You stay on that goddamn boat, you hear me?"

"I hear you," Keeler said, smiling.

"You better," Cope said. "And we never had this conversation neither." He stalked off.

Keeler sighed and climbed the aluminum ladder leaning against the coaming. He hoisted his bag of groceries aboard, stowed the perishables, and changed his clothes, slipping into a pair of clean khakis, worn Topsiders without socks, and a Truman shirt he'd bought on Antigua a couple of years before and never had occasion to wear. It was mostly orange parrots and purple foliage. He went over to Mallory Dock to watch the sunset and stopped on the way back to the boatyard for an ear-

ly dinner, blackened groupér with lime salsa.

Cope was just closing up. "Mind what I told you," he said gloomily as he let him in and locked the gate behind him. "Them dogs don't take no prisoners."

Keeler took a turn around his boat, making a mental list of things to do while she was laid up, scraping the hull, working the tarnish off the brass, and tightening the stays, and then he clambered aboard and went below to fix himself a drink and turn in. He was more comfortable on the boat than he would have been in a motel, but it felt funny to be lying in his bunk with *Siren* motionless, aground, not moving with the push and pull of the water against her. It took him a while to fall asleep.

It wasn't quite true, what Keeler had told Cope about not making any money while his boat was laid up. The fact was that Keeler wasn't hurting for money. He'd made a score some while before that could have bought him a new boat if he'd wanted one, with hot and cold running toilets and gold-plated plumbing fixtures, but Keeler wasn't into the habit of conspicuous consumption. The money that he and his Bahamian crewman, Cousin Andy, had made on their last salvage venture hadn't

changed Keeler's attitude much. There was only one thing that had changed. Keeler had never liked guns on board the *Siren*. He'd always carried a 12-gauge pump shotgun in a rack over the wheel, loaded with double-O, but that was for scaring off sharks. Since the last episode, though, he'd gotten over his nervousness and bought himself a handgun. He kept it in a storage locker by the head of his bed, behind a sliding panel where you wouldn't find it unless you knew what you were looking for. It wasn't anything fancy, just a war surplus .45 auto, slow rate of fire, hard to handle if it began jumping around in your hand, but plenty serious enough to stop a man cold if you pointed it at him, let alone shot him with it. Keeler had practiced with it a little, blowing beer bottles out of the water.

It was when the dogs stopped barking that night that he sat up in bed and took the gun out of its hiding place. He was sleeping forward in the big bunk under the bows. The dogs hadn't bothered him, not once. Cope had pointed him out to them when he left the boatyard at dusk and they'd figured out Keeler was furniture as far as they were concerned, just another part of the overall picture for the night. Their names were Trigger and Trixie, both out of

the same litter, both of them brindled, both of them neutered, and both of them more or less the size and shape of oil drums on short, powerful legs. They had square jaws as big as the slot on a public mailbox, and they seemed to take the work seriously. Their attitude toward Keeler was indifferent, neither hostile nor friendly. They padded restlessly up and down the aisles between the boats in silence and left Keeler alone. Then they started barking, and it woke him up. He checked his watch. It was three o'clock in the morning. He rolled over and pulled the covers up.

The dogs stopped barking as suddenly as they started.

Keeler sat up, listening intently to the silence. He heard a shallow doggy cough and a whimper close by the hull, as if the dog knew enough to try to reach him for help. There was a soft scrabble, paws digging weakly in the sand. Then he heard an effortful hiss of breath, not from the dog, and a sudden meaty crack. The whimpering was over.

Keeler was showing no light on the boat, but he could have made his way around *Siren* if he were blind. He reached out carefully, pushing back the panel, and got the .45 off its shelf. The gun was empty, wrapped in

oilcloth with two loaded magazines. He unwrapped it gingerly and fed one of the clips into the butt of the pistol. He racked the slide gently, avoiding any abrupt moves, stripping a round into the chamber. Putting his bare feet down on the deck, he felt his way into his jeans, tucking them up over his hips and zipping the fly. He stuck the second magazine in his back pocket as he stood up, ducking his head so he wouldn't bump the bulkhead.

He went up through the hatchway and slithered out onto the upper deck between the forward chain lockers, holding his breath. The deck scraped against his chest. His bare skin cooled and prickled in the night air. He hung fire at the gunwale, leaning over it a little and pricking up his ears.

He heard a grunt off to his right some distance away.

Infinitely gently he swung his body around so his legs hung down off the coaming. He eased himself over the edge and let himself drop. His feet hit hard sand, and he allowed his body to collapse on it, taking up the shock of landing. It was a good twelve feet down, what with the scaffolding holding up the boat. Keeler froze where he was, sprawled on the ground, alert to any change, but he could hear them going on with whatever it

was they were doing. He gathered his feet underneath him and felt out, getting his bearings. His hand touched the dead dog. She was lying on the sand, her body still giving off the heat of the living, but Keeler could smell the acrid, earthy odor of her bowels and the sharp scent of blood. He felt up her slackened flesh toward her face, and his fingers came away slippery. Trixie's skull had been split, and her brains were stuck to his hand. He wiped his hand in the sand and rose cautiously to his feet, holding the gun tight. The hair on the back of his neck was standing up.

He could see there were two of them. They had a light, a halogen lamp with a narrow focus, like a bull's-eye lantern, so it wouldn't be seen outside the boatyard, and they were passing something over the transom of a beached yawl. They'd dragged a stepladder over and leaned it against the hull. One of them was perched on top of it, and as Keeler watched, the man on the ground handed up a package. The guy on the ladder reached down awkwardly.

Keeler stepped out of the shadows, bracing the gun with both hands, and cleared his throat.

The two men stiffened and glanced his way. They were white, Keeler saw, only getting

a clear fix on the one at the foot of the ladder, who was heavysset, his face already thickening with belligerence, and just a quick glimpse of the other guy, small and sharp-featured.

"Climb down off of there," Keeler called to him.

The smaller man jumped to the ground and staggered, going down on all fours, and as he scrambled to his feet, the bigger man brought his own hand out from behind his back with something in it that looked an awful lot like a gun.

Keeler went into a crouch and let off two shots, the .45 jumping against his wrists. The slugs caught the big man in the chest, and the impact lifted him clean off his feet and slapped him down on the ground. He skidded across the packed sand. Keeler was startled. He blinked, and brought the gun to bear on the second man, but the little guy had already sprinted out of the light, scattering the loose surface as he ran. Keeler straightened up and crossed to the yawl.

The man he'd shot wasn't dead yet. The breath whistled in his throat, and air rattled out through his broken sternum with a liquid popping. His eyes were wide and fearful, and his diaphragm jerked spasmodically. Keeler knelt down and shut off the light, listening in the darkness for the second man,

but all he could hear was the wet gargling of the guy with the shattered lungs. He rose to his feet again and stepped away from him. There was no sound, apart from the ringing in his ears. He moved toward the main gate, walking as noiselessly as possible, but whoever it was had gotten away.

Keeler found the other dog lying dead by the hole that had been clipped through the cyclone fencing. Trigger's throat was cut, but Keeler could see a small feathered dart jutting out just behind his elbow. He knelt and ran his hand over the Rottweiler's coat, reaching up to scratch behind his ears and absentmindedly ruffle his fur. "You sons of bitches," he whispered, looking up at the night sky. He wasn't talking to the dogs. His eyeballs felt sandy in their sockets as if he'd gone too long without sleep.

The cop's name was Dalziel. He was large and black, with the cultivated sleepy air that came with the Keys, but his voice had the flat accent and sharp vowels of Chicago and Keeler didn't take him for a conch. More of a snowbird, maybe, the kind who came south for the winter and then stayed on.

They'd been through it twice

at least. Dalziel kept poking at the details like a man pushing a sore tooth with his tongue. "You say you didn't get a close look at the second man?" he asked again.

"Skinny, ferret-faced," Keeler said. "He might have had a ponytail. A longhair."

"A longhair," Dalziel repeated, amused. "I haven't heard that expression in a month of Sundays. You mean like a Dead-head, or an aging hippie?"

"It's just an impression," Keeler told him. "I didn't get that close a look."

"You think you'd know him if you saw him again?"

"Maybe," Keeler said.

"Well, I'd appreciate it if you'd take the time to look at some mug books," Dalziel said.

"What about the other guy?" Keeler asked.

"The one you tagged? Name of Westfall, Harold T. Known around town as Buddy. We've got a jacket on him."

"He was local?"

"Local's a relative term. Anyway, it'd be nice if the skinny dude turned out to be one of Buddy's known associates. He didn't keep the best of company."

"It's a common complaint," Keeler said.

"Look, uh, Buddy Westfall was small change, but he had a mean streak. He picked on people,

liked to slap his women around. He's been popped more than once on aggravated domestic. He shuffled drugs, he worked a little protection, he was generally a nuisance. In other words, he's not what you could call a big loss to the community."

"Is that supposed to make me feel better about shooting him?" Keeler asked.

"Would you feel better if you were the one who'd gotten killed, captain?"

Keeler shoved his hands in his pockets and scuffed at the sand with his sneaker. "What were they after?" he asked.

"Hard to tell," Dalziel said.

"It looked to me like they were loading something on board, although it would make more sense if they'd been taking something off. What was it, contraband?"

Dalziel shook his head. "Accelerant," he said. "That's something else Buddy Westfall tried his hand at. Arson."

"Arson? For what, the insurance?"

"That's the obvious motive," Dalziel said. "Except that there's no owner of record. She's a derelict. Salvage, you want to bid on her. The Coast Guard found her adrift off the Tortugas. No crew, mooring lines sheared. They rigged a tow and brought her in. They've advertised her registration for a

month, but they've drawn a blank. There's no vessel of that description reported missing."

"Somebody must have wanted to destroy evidence," Keeler said.

"Like traces of drugs? I wish it were true, captain, but the state police brought in a dope-sniffing dog from Coral Gables and came up dry."

"The way it works," Keeler said, "you shrink-wrap the drugs, airtight, and then you wrap them up in a garbage bag full of mothballs. No animal's going to smell anything with the fumes."

"You have some experience in this line of work?" Dalziel asked, smiling.

"Just what I've heard," Keeler told him. "Did the Coast Guard go over the boat, too?"

"Sure. They put in calls to DEA and the FBI, but the Feds have lost interest. They like your high-profile glamour cases, and this is low on their scale of priorities."

"If there's nothing in the boat worth stealing, why were the dogs killed to get at it?"

"Yeah," Dalziel said unhappily. "That's bothersome. There was no real reason at all. The dogs had already been hit with tranquilizer darts, probably from outside the fence, before Laurel and Hardy even cut the chain-link. It's pure meanness.

Makes about as much sense as trying to set fire to a boat nobody's laid claim to."

"Maybe they were sending Cope a message," Keeler said.

Dalziel pulled a face. "Cope's an unpleasant son of a bitch, but he's clean," he said. "We're still checking on it." He hefted the .45 in his large hand and studied Keeler. "Then there's you to consider," he remarked.

"I'm new in town," Keeler pointed out.

"I didn't figure there was anything to that angle," the detective said gloomily. "I'm going to have to keep this weapon, though," he told Keeler. "You have anything else on the boat?"

Keeler shrugged. "I've got a Remington pump," he said.

Dalziel shook his head. "You don't take my meaning," he said. "Florida gun laws aren't that strict, but you still got your ten day waiting period. I shouldn't be suggesting this, mind you, but you might able to pick up a nine or a .40 Smith, you ask around. Street prices are reasonable."

"I hope to be out of here inside of a week."

"You're not going anywhere until your boat's back in the water, captain," Dalziel said. "In the meantime, somebody might try again. If not for Cope, then maybe for you. You put a stick

in somebody's eye, sailor. I'd think about that, if I were you." He walked off.

Keeler went over to where Cope was standing, next to the yawl in its cradle. "Sorry about the dogs," Keeler said.

"You and me both," Cope said. "I knew you were trouble, captain, but I didn't know how much." His eyes were bloodshot and his face raw from a quick, careless shave. "I guess I should thank you," he muttered grudgingly.

"I'm not happy with the way things turned out, either," Keeler said. "You don't shoot somebody every day."

Cope regarded him sourly. "I woulda shot both of them bastards myself if I'd had the chance," he said. "And I wish I had done, too, before they did my dogs. Them dogs was worth eight hundred bucks apiece."

Keeler didn't say anything.

"They was savage brutes, it's true," Cope said, less truculently, "but they was always respectful. I never had to hit 'em, not more than once."

Keeler looked up at the stern of the yawl. The name on her transom read *Mongoose*, out of Road Town in Tortola. She was a good sixty feet from stem to stern, with a fresh paint job by the look of it. The rigging was tight, and the brass was clean, given that she'd been sitting

awhile. Somebody had been paying close attention to this boat until recently. She had beautiful lines although her design was a little old fashioned, and there was a familiar look to her, Keeler thought. He didn't know this particular boat, but he'd seen boats like her before. He asked Cope if he'd given her a new coat of paint.

Cope shook his head. "Coast Guard's been paying the per diem," he said. "That's for storage, not maintenance."

Keeler took a slow turn around the yawl, Cope shuffling along beside him. "Mind if I go aboard?" Keeler asked.

Cope shrugged. "Be my guest," he said.

The stepladder was still leaning against the stern, and Keeler climbed up. He ran his hand over the transom and then scraped at the paint with his thumbnail. A patch of paint scaled off like the skin of an onion. The layer underneath looked fresh, too. Keeler frowned, and took his folding knife from the scabbard in his back pocket. He snapped it open and scraped off some more paint, working his way across, shaving paint with the knife.

"Hold on a minute," Cope called up to him. "This vessel is U.S. Government property, and I'm responsible for it."

"Go get your Polaroid," Keeler said. He knew Cope had one.

You always took pictures of a boat that came into your yard, to satisfy the insurance adjusters.

"Well, at your goddamn service, I'm sure," Cope said sarcastically. "Anything else?"

"Paint thinner, steel wool, a couple of clean rags."

"All of a sudden you're a big noise around here?" Cope demanded. "You can't go carving your initials in the hull, I won't have it."

"I'm going to get you off the hook, Cope," Keeler said. "You might even claim a finder's fee."

Cope went off, the set of his shoulders grumpy.

Keeler turned the knife in his hand, holding the blade back to front, and began taking off more paint, working slowly against the grain of the wood, brushing the edge of the knife along it and teasing out the layer of paint underneath without peeling it off, like correcting a stencil or paring an apple, trying to bring up what was just below the surface, almost as if he were taking a rubbing off a gravestone.

"Pirates?" Dalziel repeated, carefully. His tone was flat and unconvinced. "What are you talking about? Yo-ho-ho and a bottle of rum?"

Keeler shrugged. "Call it hijacking, then, if piracy sounds too romantic," he said. "But

there's nothing romantic about it. They board a vessel and set the crew adrift, or just throw them overboard, and then they sell the boat later with forged papers, down in the islands."

The chief petty officer nodded. "Or they use the boat to smuggle drugs," he said. "There's more of it going around than gets reported."

Dalziel looked at the Coast Guard NCO. "You folks don't like to advertise it, either," he said.

"Not to the general public," the CPO said. His name was Stark. "You hear stories. Every once in a while there's an actionable complaint, but by and large, nobody wants to admit it's happening."

"Bad for the tourist trade?" Dalziel suggested.

"It's not just that," Stark told him. "It's hard for us to make a case. Sometimes you can't even establish provenance. You might impound a boat if you have evidence it was used for illegal activity, dope, or guns, but if you can't prove previous ownership, you go into court with the lesser charges, like possession, or intent to distribute. You don't have grounds for piracy. There's no way to convict."

"I think you missed a trick, chief," Keeler said. "That derelict yawl in Cope's boatyard. The two guys who tried to set fire to

her were out to destroy evidence." He glanced at Dalziel. "The boat itself. It is the evidence."

"We haven't identified the boat or who her owners might have been," Stark told him.

"I've got a way to do that," Keeler said.

Chief Stark looked at Dalziel and then back to Keeler. "I'm open to suggestions," he said.

"I grew up around Buzzard's Bay, next door to Cape Cod," Keeler told him. "Learned to sail on Beetle cats. It's a popular design. They're built by the Concordia boatworks in South Dartmouth, Massachusetts."

"They must have built a lot of them," Dalziel remarked.

"And every one of them by hand," Keeler said. "Catboats are one of their specialties. So are racing yawls."

CPO Stark got a sleepy look on his face and sat back in his chair, smiling slowly. "The yawl in Cope's custody, it's a Concordia design?"

"The catboats are spec, but the yawls are all custom."

"I may be slow on the uptake here," Dalziel said, "but where does that get us?"

"Take a boat like mine," Keeler said. "Once you strip her down, there's not much difference between her and any other forty-odd foot Hatteras, but with a Concordia, no two of them are

exactly the same. They put a brass plaque up forward, too, with the date of original construction."

"Did you look for it?" Stark asked.

Keeler smiled. "We should be so lucky," he said. "It's been removed."

"Like stealing a car and filing the numbers off the engine block," Dalziel said.

"Except that whoever hired Buddy Westfall and his pal knew it wasn't that simple," Keeler said. "Concordia keeps a record, who commissioned the boat, who the designer was, what the specs were, when it was built. And if the boat gets sold, subsequent owners usually reregister them and bring them back to Concordia for refit, like as not." He glanced at CPO Stark. "You see what I'm getting at? Suppose you fax Concordia the yawl's specifications, length and beam, draft and displacement, the height of her masts, materials used in her construction, as many accurate details as possible, in particular anything that stands apart in her fittings or the layout belowdecks that distinguishes her from any other boats built during the same period. Each boat is different, and Concordia has the blueprints for every boat they ever built."

"It's a longshot," Stark said.

"You could narrow it down to

boats built between 1950 and, say, 1975," Keeler said. "My best guess is, she's about thirty years old, but she's been overhauled sometime in the last ten to fifteen years." He leaned forward and dropped a couple of Polaroid photographs on Stark's desk. "These might help," he added, watching the chief's face.

Stark met his gaze for a moment and then studied the Polaroids. "I'll be damned," he murmured. He sat back in his chair and handed the pictures to Dalziel without comment.

"She was painted recently," Keeler said. "They sanded the old finish first, of course, so the new paint would take, but they didn't sand it down to bare wood. They must have been in a hurry because all they did was roughen the surface of the paint underneath. The paint was beginning to flake off, so I scrubbed at it with solvent and steel wool. I let the paint thinner evaporate, and that's what I found." He pointed out the faint lettering visible on the yawl's stern.

"There's a kind of ghost image," Dalziel said. "Whoever stole the boat painted over the original name."

"Maybe with infrared, we could make out what it was, but that's the best I could do," Keeler said.

"It's still a lot more than we had before you walked in here,

captain," CPO Stark said. "And it's more than enough for me to get the ball rolling, with access to the computers at NCIC. I guess I'm going to be burning the midnight oil, patched into a mainframe in D.C." He stood up and shook hands with them both.

Keeler and Dalziel went out to Dalziel's unmarked car. "I'll give you a ride back to Old Town," the detective said. "You ready to come and take a look at those mug books like I asked you?"

"How about tomorrow morning?" Keeler asked.

"The sooner, the better," Dalziel said. "I'd rather you fingered the guy before he follows you up a dark alley."

"I haven't noticed anybody following me," Keeler said.

"That's because you haven't been looking," Dalziel said. "I put somebody on you this morning."

"Protective custody?"

"Call it protective coloration," Dalziel said.

"Call him off, then," Keeler said. "If there's somebody else watching me, we don't want to scare them away."

Dalziel stopped with his hand on the driver's door handle and looked across the roof of the car at Keeler. "You're a civilian, captain," he said. "You get my drift?"

"You can't stake me out for bait," Keeler said, smiling.

"I wouldn't have any objection if I thought it would help," Dalziel said. "I mean I don't want you gumming up the works, acting like a cowboy."

"Don't shut me out of it," Keeler said.

Dalziel didn't let his eyes drop. "You seem to be taking this kind of personally," he remarked. "How come?"

"I was thinking about the way they killed Cope's dogs," Keeler said. "It was spiteful and unnecessary."

"And they had nothing to lose by it," Dalziel told him. "I'd be thinking about what happened to those dogs, too, if I were you. These people don't leave loose ends."

Cope had hired a pair of security guards to patrol the boatyard that night, but he resented the expense and told Keeler as much. He also didn't want Keeler spending another night.

Keeler shrugged. "The cat's already out of the bag," he said. "They won't risk a second try."

"You're a damned Jonah," Cope said. "I want to be shut of you, and that as early as possible."

Keeler smiled. "Fix my boat," he said.

Cope stomped away, muttering.

Keeler climbed aboard *Siren* and changed his clothes. Then he went out for a walk. It was just after six and coming on to evening, but dusk in the Keys is unhurried. The light turns imperceptibly from coral to violet and darkness is sudden, but Keeler figured he had a good three hours of daylight left. He walked half a dozen blocks along Duval, but the sidewalks were still crowded, so he turned up Olivia toward the cemetery, where it was quieter. They bury their dead above ground in Key West, and the pale stone tombs caught the fading light. A flock of doves settled among the crypts, fluttering like leaves, but the air was still. The heat of day was beginning to lift. Keeler cut back across Duval to the corner of Whitehead Street. There was a group of Japanese tourists gathered outside the Hemingway house, taking pictures of the garden through the wrought-iron fence, cats prowling under the bougainvillea. Keeler had no informed opinion of Hemingway, just what he'd heard, but the man had loved fishing, and women, so Keeler was inclined to give him the benefit of the doubt. He headed up Whitehead to Mallory Dock and the sunset, taking his time.

There was a raw bar upstairs at the Pier House, on the deck overlooking the street. Keeler

was nursing a beer when he thought he saw the ferret-faced man in the crowd below. Then the man looked up and met his eyes.

Keeler set his beer down and drew back, sliding off his stool and trying to make himself inconspicuous. His feeling of well-being was gone.

He made for the stairs, hoping to catch sight of the guy again. He was pretty sure there'd been nobody following him tonight, but if Dalziel had called off the surveillance, then Keeler was on his own. He slipped into the crowd at street level and began to work his way across the square. He'd lost his man by now, but he didn't think it was any accident he'd seen him in the first place. They were setting him up. They couldn't do anything here, there were too many people around. They had to lure him away from the crowd, and Keeler understood he was meant to follow the ferret-faced man. He began to get cold feet. He shouldn't have been so cocky with Dalziel. It was easy to joke about being used for bait, but he didn't find it funny now.

He eased over toward the bank of public telephones. He didn't make it obvious. He was fishing in his pocket for change and already lifting the receiver off the hook when somebody

took him by the left arm, gently, and another man moved in abruptly on his right, intimate and a little too close.

Keeler let himself relax. The second man tossed his arm familiarly across Keeler's shoulders, and Keeler tried not to tense, hoping to catch them by surprise and ready to throw both of them off. But as he started to set himself, coming up and around in a half-turn, he felt a sharp prick at the nape of his neck, and an icy dullness spread down his spine. He tried to dig his elbow into the gut of the guy behind him, but his arm had suddenly gone to sleep. When he opened his mouth to yell, his tongue seemed impossibly thick. The light was yellow and elastic as if he were swimming in syrup. Keeler's legs had turned to jelly. He couldn't stand without help.

His two friends held him up, slack and glassy-eyed, supporting his inert weight on either side. They carried him unresisting through the crowd, and Keeler saw just how it looked, a drunk being led away to sleep it off, dragging his feet on the pavement.

It felt like the mother of all hangovers. He came to slowly, groggy and disoriented. He had a dull ache at the base of his skull, along

with a terrible case of cottonmouth. His tongue seemed stuck to the back of his teeth, and his limbs were cold and weightless. He tried to feel his way back into his body from the inside out as the circulation returned to his hands and feet. He wasn't sure he could move if he'd wanted to. The hammer of his pulse was like a stitch in his temples, streaking his vision, and there was an unsteady throb behind his eyeballs that echoed in his sinus cavities.

He opened his eyes and blinked once or twice before realizing he was in near darkness. The throbbing didn't subside, and he recognized the vibration of a marine engine changing pitch as it throttled down. He could smell diesel oil, and water in the bilges, and knew he was on board a boat, rocking now as she slackened speed and settled in the swell.

From the slow, heavy movement, he judged they were some distance from shore, out in the Gulf or crossing the Banks, depending on their heading. He started to sit up, but his stomach was seized with a sudden cramp and he had an attack of nausea.

He took a deep breath, closing his eyes briefly and willing himself to calm. His stiffened muscles relaxed with a slow shudder. He swung his legs over the

edge of the bunk, fighting his rising gorge, and sat up.

A lighter flared in the dark and snapped shut. The hot ash of the cigarette glowed. "The head's over to your left if you can make it that far on your hands and knees," the man with the cigarette said. "Or has your stomach settled?"

"What did you spike me with?" Keeler asked, his voice a croak. He ran his tongue across his lips. They felt rubbery and anesthetized.

"A synthetic alkaloid derived from curare," the man with the cigarette said. "Developed by the KGB a few years back. You'd be surprised what's available on the open market these days." He switched on the binnacle lamp. It was shrouded and cast dull shadows on the bulkhead behind him.

Keeler blinked, letting his eyes adjust. The light wasn't strong, and it was directed at the surface of a table, bolted to the deck, where the man with the cigarette was sitting. Keeler couldn't make out his features. He tried to shake the cobwebs out of his head.

The man with the cigarette leaned forward into the light and rested his elbows on his knees, giving Keeler a better look at him. "My name is Slo-cum, for want of a better," he said, smiling pleasantly. "Cap-

tain Joshua Slocum. Or you can call me Billy Bones if you prefer. You might have heard of me even if you can't place the face."

"Why have you kept me alive?" Keeler asked. "Two of your goons doped the dogs at Cope's boatyard, but they killed them anyway after they'd already knocked them out."

"It's a poor workman who blames his tools," the man calling himself Slocum said, "but Fiddler's not the sharpest knife in the drawer. As for the guy he picked up to take along on the job, well—" Slocum shrugged philosophically. "You put a couple of holes in the poor bastard."

"Fiddler's the rat-faced character?"

"You work with what you've got," Slocum said. "Once in a while you get lucky and wind up with a competent professional, but mostly you get stuck with losers, the Lee Harvey Oswalds of this world."

"You still didn't answer my question," Keeler said.

Slocum dropped his cigarette on the deck and stepped on it. "Fiddler wanted to cut your throat and feed you to the fish," he said. "But you interest me, captain. I've got the feeling there's more to you than meets the eye."

"I'm flattered," Keeler told him.

"Don't let it go to your head,"

Slocum said. He got to his feet. "You think you've found your sea legs yet?"

Keeler had felt the engine revs pick up again and they began making way, but there was no heave or pitch to indicate a heavy sea and he figured them to be in shoal water. He reached for the overhead bunk and pulled himself upright. He held onto the bedframe for balance.

"Not too steady on our pins, are we?" Slocum asked.

"I'll try not to fall overboard," Keeler told him.

"If it comes to that, you won't have any choice," Slocum said. He opened the cabin door.

Keeler wobbled out into the passageway, a narrow corridor running fore and aft. There were quite a few doorways to other cabins or compartments leading off it, and there was plenty of headroom. Whatever kind of boat he was on, it was goodsized from the layout belowdecks. The bulkheads were painted institutional green, like a merchant or military vessel. Keeler noticed watertight doors at either end of the corridor, to seal it off. Slocum led him toward a companionway astern, and Keeler mounted it cautiously, stiff as an old man, Slocum close behind. They came out topside, in the lee of the flying bridge. The unlit fantail looked big enough to land a helicopter.

Keeler moved to the rail, his steps still halting and uncertain, and looked out over the water. A gibbous moon was setting in their wake, but a faint wash of pale light showed along the horizon to their east and he could make out the line between sea and sky. He thought it must be nearly five in the morning. The boat held steady at some eight knots on an easterly heading, and there was a strong enough offshore breeze to chill him through his windbreaker. Ahead, daylight began to gather, and a dark smudge that he'd taken for cloud cover resolved itself into some kind of landmark, squat and forbidding, large and low against the sky. He wasn't sure of the distance.

"Fort Jefferson," Slocum remarked, moving up alongside him. "I wouldn't try to swim for it if I were you, not in your condition. It's not as close as it looks, and the reefs out here in the Tortugas are swarming with sharks."

Keeler turned away from the rail and took a better look at the boat he was on. It was light enough now that he could see it, and he was impressed. It was over a hundred feet long, with a forty foot beam, and rode high in the water as if on hydrofoils, but her speed was too slow for that. "This didn't come cheap," he said to Slocum.

Slocum nodded. "She's a test craft designed by Bell Aerospace for a joint services program, Surface Effect study. Thirty-two hundred horse diesels for lift and double that for propulsion. She can do better than forty knots in a calm sea. I call her *Caliban*. It has a nice ring to it, don't you think?"

"It's a lot of boat for somebody who's just scouting the odd shipwreck," Keeler remarked.

Slocum smiled. "I'm no treasure hunter," he said. "No more than you are, captain."

Keeler didn't comment. It was the second time Slocum had suggested Keeler was hiding something, but Keeler didn't know what he was driving at. He couldn't get a handle on Slocum, the guy was too smooth. At the same time he seemed somehow insubstantial, like smoke.

"Take a look around her, captain," Slocum said. "Learn the ropes. A boat like this, she needs a familiar hand. For your sake I hope you're a quick study."

Giving him the run of the ship was another thing Keeler was unable to fathom, being treated like a guest instead of a hostage, unless Slocum was paying out line, waiting for him to make a wrong move, or maybe the right one. But he soon realized he was on a short leash. Fiddler was shadowing him.

The man with the ferret face kept his distance and ducked out of sight if Keeler looked over his shoulder, but Fiddler didn't put much effort into it. Keeler was supposed to know he was there. They hadn't been introduced. Keeler liked it that way. Their mutual hostility was better than radar. He waited until he could take advantage of it, and he had his chance soon enough.

He'd been poking around belowdecks, getting a feel for the boat. She ran on an air cushion, a rigid sidewall design that was fan-generated instead of using hydraulics. Keeler figured her draft was something like four feet with the cushion deployed. The planing effect accounted for her quick speed. If the cushion were disabled, it would slow the boat down, and the increased draft would limit her agility. There were hundreds of reefs in the Dry Tortugas, some of them just below the surface, and if *Caliban* drew six or eight feet of water, she'd have to steer clear of the shallows and keep to the deeper channels between the coral heads, like threading a needle, making it harder to avoid pursuit.

There were access panels on the lower decks that opened on an inspection crawlway for the inner hull. Keeler climbed into it and crept aft on his hands and

knees. The space was cramped, too narrow for his shoulders, and the atmosphere was stifling. High intensity emergency lights were wired to the bulkhead at ten foot intervals, but only the blue telltale strips were lit up, indicating a charge. The halogen lights themselves operated on battery packs and only kicked in when main power was lost.

Keeler stopped, sitting back on his haunches and panting in the darkness. He reached up and felt for the wiring harness. If the lighting array was tied into a junction box off the main circuits, he was out of luck, but a plug strip made more sense if you needed the lights to make repairs. He found the outlet and pulled the plug. The overhead light came on, suddenly blinding him. When his sight came back, he saw the blue battery telltale had blinked to red.

Keeler looked around. The inner hull was featureless. Below him, underneath the corrugated grid of the crawlway, he could see the fan housings, but they were sealed. The baffles were through-bolted, and even if that were the only weak spot, he didn't have an oxyacetylene torch to cut them.

From what he could see, none of the mechanical parts for the cushion could be serviced, or sabotaged, without taking the

boat out of the water. As for electrical, the power supply was out of reach, and there was bound to be a backup.

The one odd thing he noticed was a series of convex plates that ran along the crawlway opposite the hull and that were wired in sequence but not to the main circuits and not to the emergency light battery packs. They seemed out of place, almost a jury-rig. He touched the striations on their surface, ridged in a crosshatch pattern, and then sat back on his heels. He wasn't enough of an engineer to analyze the float system, or what redundancies were built into it, but he knew a booby-trap when he saw one. The curved plates were Claymore mines, hooked up to DC current. Somewhere on board *Caliban* there was something as simple as a twelve-volt battery or a hand-cranked detonator, primitive but reliable and meant to blow her out of the water. He plugged the emergency light back in, and it went out.

Creeping ahead in the ill-lit conduit, he checked a few more of the lights, looking down as he unplugged them so his eyes would adjust and then plugging them in again. Each time the telltale went from blue to red and then back to blue. If the circuit was connected to a master outage board, Keeler thought,

somebody on the bridge probably knew where he was. They could follow his progress by watching which lights he unplugged. He made his way toward the stern in the dark. If they wanted to find him, they would.

The crawlway dead-ended, and Keeler undogged the last access panel and eased through. He was still in a confined space, some kind of maintenance area between-decks near the engine room, where the noise level could jar your teeth loose. The deck plates hummed and shook underfoot. Keeler secured the access panel and moved off amidships, not sure of his bearings. The acrid exhaust fumes made his eyes water.

He felt his way to a hatch, and reaching for it, he had a premonition, a sudden chill. He turned back on himself, and he and Fiddler found themselves face to face. There was no room to maneuver, and the two men stared at each other. They were both bent over, breathing hard in the contaminated air. Fiddler bared his teeth like an animal caught in a corner and began to back away, still in a crouch. Keeler scrambled after him, keeping his arms away from his sides for balance, scuttling quickly forward and catching up fast. He was almost on top of Fiddler when the smaller man turned

on him quickly and brought his hand up, his eyes glittering with rage. Keeler stopped himself short before he stumbled into the knife, and Fiddler shifted his weight, smiling slowly.

Keeler was watching the knife, not Fiddler's face. Fiddler held it flat in a combat grip, choking up on the blade a little with his thumb.

"Used that on the dogs, did you?" Keeler asked him.

"We'd of knowed you was there, we'd of done you like we done them dogs," Fiddler hissed.

"You got me in the here and now," Keeler told him. "Or did you plan to wait until I was asleep?"

"I'm going to open you up, G-man, or whatever you are," Fiddler said hoarsely. "You're going to be tripping on your own damn guts."

"You talk too much," Keeler said.

"Suit yourself," Fiddler said.

He made a quick feint with the knife, straight-armed, and Keeler spread his arms and sucked in his belly. He glanced down at Fiddler's feet. Fiddler shuffled left, Keeler moved right to get inside him, and Fiddler jabbed suddenly at his eyes. He was faster than Keeler expected, and Keeler snapped his head back. The point of the knife nicked the bridge of his nose, and Fiddler came at him again,

quick as a snake. Keeler blocked the knife with his arm, twisting away, and felt the cut, not deep, but a warning. Fiddler was planning to sever an artery and bleed him to death. He sliced at him backhand, and Keeler lurched to the side. He shook the blood off his face, trying to stay close enough to crowd the other man. He'd started out too mad to be scared, but now he was less sure of himself. The smaller man was too damn fast on his feet. Fiddler lunged at him, cawing loudly. He drove the knife squarely at Keeler's stomach, and Keeler caught his wrist and elbow, bringing Fiddler's arm across his body as he fell backwards on the deck and swinging his left forearm like a club into Fiddler's windpipe. Fiddler clawed at his eyes with his free hand, and Keeler tried to break Fiddler's grip on the knife. Keeler was underneath and didn't have the leverage, but he had the weight and he rolled them both over so he was on top. Fiddler was squirming, his face in the deck plates. Keeler managed to sit up, sweat and blood dripping off his nose, and held his knee against Fiddler's elbow. He took the smaller man's wrist in both hands and bent his arm back on itself until the ligaments began to tear. Fiddler dropped the knife. Keel-

er reached out clumsily and snatched it up. He took Fiddler's hair in one hand and pushed his head down, holding the knife to his neck with the other.

Keeler's head was pounding, but he could feel Fiddler's pulse beating. The knife was pressed up against a carotid artery. Keeler's breathing was ragged. Blood was still dripping off his nose from the cut between his eyes, and his hand was slippery from the cut on his arm. He felt woozy and short on air. The diesel fumes in the compartment made him gag. He knew he couldn't go through with it anyway. He threw the knife to one side impatiently and heard it clatter on a grating. Keeler sagged on Fiddler's inert body.

"You're still breathing, you little turd," he whispered into Fiddler's neck. "Don't press your luck."

Fiddler twitched underneath him.

Keeler heard a footfall and turned his head.

The hatch behind them was open now, and Slocum squatted next to it, looking down at them. Keeler sat up, and Fiddler slithered quickly out of his reach.

"Learning the ropes, are we?" Slocum inquired, amused.

"Keep the son of a bitch away from me," Fiddler wheezed, catching his breath. "Next time, he won't skate so easy."

"Well, we'll just have to watch out for that next time, won't we?" Slocum remarked indulgently. He held out his hand to Fiddler. "I swear, it's like dealing with children."

Fiddler took his hand grudgingly, and Slocum pulled him up through the hatch.

"You next, captain," Slocum said to Keeler.

Keeler didn't take Slocum's hand but hoisted himself through the hatch on his own. "He's right about the next time," he said, nodding toward Fiddler as he got to his feet. "I can't answer for what might happen."

Slocum nodded. "I guess we'll have to see that it doesn't," he said. He reached over and tugged Fiddler closer. "Captain Keeler hasn't outlived his usefulness, Fiddler. You can go along with that, can't you?"

Fiddler shrugged away from Slocum's grasp, acting sullen and aggrieved.

Slocum grinned at Keeler. "He'll come around," he said.

"Don't count on it," Keeler said.

Slocum shrugged. "He travels fastest who travels alone, I guess," he said, stepping back to let Keeler pass.

Keeler shouldered by them, and Slocum put a hand on Fiddler's arm. Then he slid his arm up against his neck in a hammerlock. Keeler saw it out of the

corner of his eye and turned, uncertain. Slocum gripped the hinge of Fiddler's jaw as the ferret-faced man struggled, kicking out, and Slocum screwed Fiddler's head around with a grunt of sudden effort, breaking his neck. It sounded like green wood cracking. Slocum let go, and Fiddler collapsed in a boneless puddle at his feet.

"I took you for a quick study, captain," Slocum said to Keeler, catching his breath. "Not quick enough, I fear."

Keeler stared at him, not ready for a second to believe it, and then lurched toward the companionway to the upper deck. He scrambled up the ladder and staggered to the rail for some air, hoping he wouldn't throw up.

Slocum had followed him, he realized, and stood not far off, nonchalant. Keeler took a couple of deep breaths. "You coldblooded bastard," he said.

"It was time to cut my losses," Slocum said. "I'm still waiting for a return on my investment in you, captain."

In the light of day Keeler could see that Slocum had a youthful face like Audie Murphy or Dick Clark, but there was a tightness to his skin that hinted at cosmetic surgery and his eyes seemed weary. They were pale and washed out, like an Eskimo dog's, and as cold as

dogsled runners. It wasn't a gaze Keeler wanted to measure up to.

"I don't know what you take me for," Keeler told him.

Slocum studied him for a moment. "You're my ticket out, captain," he said finally, with a crooked smile.

Keeler remembered a proverb he'd once heard: Three can keep a secret if two are safely dead. He thought it was Benjamin Franklin who'd said it. The fact that the boat was wired to blow apart was Slocum's secret, and with Fiddler dead, that only left one to go, but Keeler wasn't sure he was next on the list. Slocum was playing a careful game, and Keeler didn't know what cards he still held.

Late that afternoon they made a rendezvous with a float plane. They were past the outer limit of the continental shelf, a hundred miles beyond Fort Jefferson, and a hundred and fifty miles north of Cuba. At the other points of the compass there was nothing but the empty waters of the Gulf of Mexico.

The aircraft came in from the south, flying low over the water, and banked in a slow turn, making a visual reconnaissance of *Caliban* before landing to starboard and sending up a roostertail of spray.

It was a twin Beech turbo-

prop with external drop tanks to increase its range. Keeler was pretty sure the Yucatan Peninsula was the closest landfall next to Cuba, but the plane could have flown from any direction inside a radius of a thousand miles, the Gulf Coast of the U.S. or Mexico, the West Indies, Central America. The final approach course didn't mean anything if the pilot had taken it down below radar before setting the heading. The fuselage markings identified it as civil, not military, but Keeler wasn't that familiar with aviation call letters and the registration was probably faked.

Slocum lowered a boat, and a coxswain took it across to the plane. Keeler watched with interest, expecting to see an illegal transfer, like weapons or drugs, but he figured Slocum's angle was more sophisticated, and whatever commodity he dealt in, risk increased its value. Keeler was surprised to see a figure in a plain tan jumpsuit climb down out of the aircraft and into the jolly boat, and more surprised that he came empty-handed. The launch headed back for *Caliban*. The plane revved its engines and swung around into the wind and began its takeoff run, ungainly at first and then steadying as it picked up speed, the prop wash churning up foam in its wake, and then it lifted off

the water, as impossible as a pelican taking flight.

Keeler had been holding his breath. Gaining altitude, the aircraft banked away to the west and flew off toward the sun. The light swallowed it up, although the sound of the engines carried back across the water for quite a while after it was lost to sight against the horizon line.

The launch came alongside, and the passenger scrambled up the gangway and came aboard. Slocum shook hands with him, and the two of them went below. The crew swung the launch up on davits and made it fast. The ship got under way.

Keeler, left to his own devices, followed Slocum.

They'd gone down to the state-rooms. Keeler walked along the corridor until he came to what he thought was Slocum's door. There were voices behind it, not particularly angry but urgent. Keeler paused, about to knock, but then thought better of it. He went to the next door and tried the knob. It was unlocked. He eased it cautiously ajar and peered in. The cabin was unoccupied, the bunk beds stripped and the lockers empty. Keeler slipped inside, closing the door carefully behind him and latching it. He went into the head and found what was left of a roll of toilet paper. He stripped the

last of the tissue off so he could use the cardboard tube and put his ear to the adjoining bulkhead.

He heard only a steady mumble, and that was the vibration of the diesels. There was a higher-pitched whine as the fans kicked in. *Caliban* was rising higher in the water as the cushion deployed and picking up speed. The ambient noise dropped to a steady hum, and Keeler thought he caught the snatch of a phrase from the cabin next door. Somebody raised his voice, but it was in Spanish. The only thing Keeler made out was *los olvidados*. The forgotten. Which ones, he wondered, out of so many? And who forgot them? But he was left with the question, since he heard nothing else.

Slocum was smoking a cigar on the fantail when Keeler caught sight of him again. It was coming on toward evening, the sun just going down over the horizon, and bony streaks of cirrus fanned across the sky, the clouds crimson and silver from the light. The calm Gulf waters reflected the sunset like oil, coppery and iridescent. Their heading was north by west, and the disturbance of their wake glittered as the light touched it and then trailed away into the darkening sea astern. The first faint

stars were just visible to the east.

Keeler went over to the rail and leaned on it, watching the water slide away behind them. Neither man spoke, and the two of them could almost have been taken for friends sharing a companionable silence at the close of day.

Slocum drew on his cigar pensively, one last time, and threw it over the side. "I'll miss this," he remarked, still gazing aft.

"I didn't realize you were giving it up," Keeler said.

Slocum smiled. "I think I've worn out my welcome, captain Keeler," he observed. "Wouldn't you say?"

"I don't know what your purpose is," Keeler said.

"Misdirection," Slocum said.

"It's an interesting career choice."

Slocum folded his arms, leaning against a stanchion and studying the wake. "I was involved with the Contra resupply effort a while back, running guns into Nicaragua," he said. He glanced over at Keeler. "I figured you already knew that or you wouldn't have been fishing in troubled waters."

"You've got me wrong," Keeler said. "You think I'm some kind of cloak-and-dagger operative, but I'm not."

"I'll take your word for it,"

Slocum said, smiling. "It kept you alive for a while, though."

"Fiddler thought I was Treasury, or FBI," Keeler said.

Slocum shrugged.

"Who exactly do you work for?" Keeler asked.

Slocum looked off into the middle distance. "Once upon a time, south Florida was headquarters to the biggest clandestine intelligence operation in the world, right after the Bay of Pigs. But then Kennedy got shot and Vietnam was put on the front burner. Cuba was a non-starter. Those fruit loops in Miami lost most of their traction, with LBJ in office."

"*Los olvidados*," Keeler suggested.

Slocum gave him a sharp look. "You're shrewder than you make yourself out to be, captain," he said.

"That yawl back in the boatyard in Key West, the one you wanted Fiddler to torch, whose idea was it to rechristen it *Mon-goose*?" Keeler asked. "That's the name of the program the White House ran against Castro back in the sixties."

"Everybody's got their sentimental side," Slocum said.

"I don't know whether to credit that or not," Keeler told him. "What got you so chummy with these Cubans who want to hold Castro's feet to the fire?"

"Common interest," Slocum

said. "Deniability. The fact that they were disposable." He turned and looked at Keeler directly. "I'm a contract employee, not staff. CIA is hands off on this one."

"If you get caught, they claim you're a loose cannon, is that it?"

"Pretty much."

"Why turn to piracy?" Keeler asked.

"Well, that kind of backfired," Slocum said.

"I'll say," Keeler remarked.

"You're not as sophisticated as I thought," Slocum said. "You ought to be able to work that one out for yourself."

"What, that you used pleasure boats to run guns to the Contras and bring dope back into the States? I can't figure the angle. Sooner or later somebody was bound to sit up and take notice."

"You can't see the forest for the trees, Keeler," Slocum said. "They were *supposed* to take notice. That's the whole point. We were trying to kill two birds with one stone. You might say the end justifies the means."

"Somebody else takes the blame, namely Castro," Keeler said. "You hijack the boats, but you make it look like Fidel is behind it? That's a little thick."

"It was our chance to put Castro in the doghouse," Slocum said. "The idea was to tie Fidel into the drug trade. If we could tar him with that brush, make it

look like he was working both sides of the street, we had it made. He's not just a commie, he's in the pocket of the Colombian cocaine cartels, to finance his dictatorship, and preying on innocent American boaters into the bargain."

"Did you expect anybody to buy that?"

"There's a saying in this trade," Slocum told him. "Not every story we wish to be true is false."

"But then the funds dried up," Keeler suggested. "There wasn't any more money from Washington."

"We had to turn to more creative financing to keep the operation alive," Slocum said.

"The lesser of two evils, in other words."

"One hand washes the other," Slocum smiled.

"Dealing dope to help overthrow Castro," Keeler said. "I don't know why I'm surprised, not coming from that bunch of Ivy Leaguers who put a contract out on him with the Mafia. And all in the name of patriotism."

"What makes you think I'm a patriot?" Slocum asked him. "I could be selling my services to the highest bidder."

"Like some unlucky dictator or a secret-police chief? Who was that guy we picked up? He on the CIA payroll, or are the Colombians bankrolling him?"

Where's the suitcase filled with bearer bonds or industrial diamonds or whatever passes for currency with you people, or didn't he have time to pack his bags? Your story's full of holes, Slocum."

"You don't spoil a good story for lack of the facts."

"What are you really in this for?" Keeler asked him.

"Whatever the market will bear," Slocum said.

"Jesus," Keeler muttered. "And it's all available, isn't it? A boat built for the navy, some weird drug cooked up by the KGB, a bunch of ex-Batista thugs to do the dirty work for you. Where do you draw the line? I'd think you had more pride than to let yourself be used like this."

"I saw an opportunity," Slocum said.

"Who wound up in the pocket of the Colombians, then?"

Slocum looked away, sucking on his teeth.

"Those guys in Miami think Fidel is capable of damn near anything," Keeler said. "You cooked up this scheme to frame Castro for drug smuggling and piracy, and you ran it past the Cubans. You were preaching to the converted but there wasn't any evidence, so you decided to run up the Jolly Roger and manufacture some. That's about the size of it. You just did-

n't count on the tail wagging the dog."

"The weak rule the strong," Slocum remarked wryly.

"I'm talking about the cocaine barons, not that bunch of Cuban exiles you've led down the garden path," Keeler said.

Slocum studied him for a moment with an expression that made Keeler uncomfortable. "I expected somebody like you to turn up eventually," Slocum said. "Some bean-counter, or an undercover agent. You looked the part. That's why I made you for what you weren't, at first. Still, it can't just be coincidence, you being here, because I don't believe in it. Signs or portents maybe, but not coincidence. You might be the right man in the right place."

"I don't want to be a party to this," Keeler said.

"It's a little late for that," Slocum said. "This operation's blown. Too many people know about it, and too many of them have their hands in the till. It ran off the rails a while back, to be honest."

"You could have pulled the plug," Keeler said.

Slocum shook his head. "I didn't have an effective way to terminate," he said. "My, ah, partners in crime aren't ready to quit. It's too profitable, and the downside risk is low. They'd never let me off the hook."

"You mean they wouldn't let you walk away alive," Keeler said. "They'd kill you to protect their investment."

Slocum beamed at him as if at a good student. "What if you could have your cake and eat it, too?" he inquired.

"You can't do that if you're dead," Keeler said.

"Oh, death is a pretty convincing exit strategy," Slocum said. "A good soldier knows when to fall on his own sword."

"What makes you think I'd be willing to help?"

Slocum smiled. "The reluctant recruit often outperforms the overzealous one, if he has more to lose," he said.

Along toward daybreak, they hove to. Keeler was up on deck, but there wasn't much to see. There was low-lying fog all around them, and first light was obscure and refracted. *Caliban* lay almost dead in the water, barely making enough way to keep her from drifting. The ocean was greasy, with a slow swell. As the sun rose higher, the fog began to burn off, but the boat seemed suspended in a nether world between the glassy surface of the sea and the damp, cottony mist that obscured any sounds other than their own. The fog lifted, parting like smoke, and Keeler made out a number of high, angular struc-

tures, giant tinkertoys riding above the swells, skeletal girders and naked, rusting iron. He realized they were oil derricks on fixed platforms, the kind once used for drilling in shallow water and probably now abandoned. The newer platforms, jack-up rigs and semisubmersibles, could be moved if the wells dried up. Now he could smell the land, too, earth and vegetation, but a few miles distant. From the course they'd taken during the night, he guessed they were somewhere off the coast near Biloxi or the Mississippi delta. He didn't think Slocum meant to put into New Orleans or any other Gulf port. They were almost certainly making a secret rendezvous here in this deserted offshore oilfield.

"Isolation isn't safety," Slocum remarked, coming up alongside him. "Amateurs often confuse the two. They think you conduct shady business in a dark alley or down on the waterfront at night where there's nobody to see you but bums and out-of-luck whores, but you only call attention to yourself that way, and the fact that you've got no good reason for being there. The best place to hide is out in broad daylight in the middle of a crowd."

"How come you're not taking your own advice?" Keeler asked him.

"This wasn't my idea," Slocum said.

"But you went along with it," Keeler said. "Something tells me you weren't that hard to convince."

"You asked me about our passenger," Slocum said. "Major Obregón comes from a long line of conspirators. He's got a sixth sense for betrayal or so he likes to think. What that really means is that he's a delusional paranoid, but in this case being paranoid shows good sense. Obregón's a wanted man." Slocum smiled. "So am I, if it comes to that, but at least I'm not holding a couple of million dollars of the Cali cartel's drug money somewhere out of reach. Obregón wants to avoid a close encounter with them, getting live electrodes hooked up to his eyelids. His jockey shorts are already in enough of a bunch as it is."

"Where's the money?" Keeler asked.

"Let's just say it's in escrow," Slocum told him.

"And your pal Obregón's the patsy," Keeler said.

"He's not the only one," Slocum reminded him.

They began to thread their way between the looming platforms. The corrugated pilings rose overhead like redwoods. Keeler and Slocum were standing in the bow, and above them

on the weather deck a lookout was keeping watch.

Keeler knew *Caliban* was equipped with the latest electronic positioning gear, and he commented on it to Slocum.

"Nothing like the human factor," Slocum said.

"If you can rely on people to follow the script."

The shadows of the gigantic platforms crossed the deck, one after the other, as if they were passing between enormous rows of corn.

Slocum looked down over the bows. "These old rigs are like artificial reefs," he said. "It's an incredibly rich ecosystem. You wouldn't believe the marine life, the way the food chain's re-established itself. Everything from shrimp to bluefin and albacore. It's really kind of amazing, how it all starts out with micro-organisms, and plankton."

"My experience with bottom feeders has been limited until recently," Keeler said.

Slocum glanced at him, smiling his lopsided smile again. "You can do the right thing for the wrong reasons," he said.

"I'd rather get it right the first time," Keeler said.

"Some of us have to make up for lost ground," Slocum remarked.

"You sent Fiddler to burn the boat in Key West to cover your tracks," Keeler said. "You must

have known somebody smelled a rat. Or maybe things were getting out of hand, and the powers that be were ready to close you down."

"We all have to answer for the consequences sooner or later," Slocum said. "You, me, Fiddler, Obregón."

"The money Major Obregón's responsible for, some of the profits were supposed to be used against Castro but the bulk of it belongs to the Colombians," Keeler said. "There's a lot of loose cash in the drug business, and people get sticky fingers. Obregón's not the first guy to be tempted."

"His people in Miami are the ones in the hot seat. They have to answer for the missing money."

"You diverted it yourself," Keeler said, knowing suddenly it was true. "You set Obregón up to take the fall."

"Losing track of that much cash is hard to explain away, especially if you don't know where it is," Slocum said.

"You want to play them off against each other," Keeler said. "If you can get the Cubans and the Colombians fighting among themselves, maybe you can slip between the cracks."

"That reminds me," Slocum told him. "I want to show you something."

They were deep into the old

oilfield by now; the fog almost entirely burnt off. The corroded rigs still slid by them like ghosts, industrial artifacts that had outlasted their time.

Slocum led him back under the flying bridge to the radar room, where the navigation and comm systems linked together. The station was manned around the clock. They had SATNAV and GPS, sonar, fax machines, single-sideband transmitters, and encrypted datalinks for secure communication. There was also a weapons locker, with an ordinary Yale padlock. Slocum paused next to it for a moment and then unlocked it, leaving the padlock dangling from its hasp.

"No telling what's going to happen," he said to Keeler.

"Every man for himself," Keeler said.

"Might as well give them a level playing field," Slocum remarked.

He took Keeler to one of the vacant positions. It was equipped with LORAN, to back up the GPS. There was a storage space underneath it. Slocum crouched down and took out a battered ammo box. He handed it to Keeler and reached farther back, pulling out a couple of wires. Keeler put the box on the console and opened it. There was a package inside wrapped in oilcloth. Keeler unwrapped it. It was a

block of nonconducting Bakelite, probably dating from World War II; with a T-handled plunger that screwed down and two posts for electrical contacts. Slocum stood up.

"You know what this is, right?" he asked.

Keeler nodded, weighing it in his hands, and gave it to Slocum. He glanced around, but nobody was watching them.

Slocum had stripped the wires to expose the bare copper underneath. He wound the two leads around the contact posts and tightened the locknuts. "You loosen this collar and give the handle a couple of twists. Make it half a dozen to be on the safe side." He demonstrated in pantomime. "That builds up a static charge, and all you have to do is raise the plunger and press it down." He handed the detonator back to Keeler.

"What happens when you deliver Obregón?" Keeler asked.

"Depends on who comes to pick him up," Slocum said.

"Did you compromise him yourself? Thirty pieces of silver is a pretty nice finder's fee. Good round number."

Slocum grinned. "Round enough," he said.

"There are a lot of zeroes in a couple of million bucks, too," Keeler said.

"Don't go down with the ship,

skipper," Slocum said. "I need you alive."

"You need me alive to tell them you're dead afterwards," Keeler said. "Whoever *they* is."

"I'm counting on your survival mechanisms, or your basic instincts," Slocum said.

"I can tell you what my basic instinct is," Keeler said, his hand resting on the plunger.

"Hold that thought," Slocum said.

Keeler felt fatigue catching up with him. It wasn't so much physical as emotional. He hunkered down and put the mechanism back inside the cabinet, tucking the wires behind it. He straightened up again. "What if I can't get to it in time?" he asked Slocum. "Or you can't?"

"Might as well kiss your ass goodbye," Slocum told him. "There aren't any innocent bystanders in this business."

"Like the people on board the boats you attacked?" Keeler asked.

Slocum shrugged. "Fortunes of war," he said.

By now the sun was high, but there was still an overcast, a haze that bottled up the light, giving it an uneven focus. The pilot throttled down and swung the helm over, taking *Caliban* in under one of the platforms, its immense shadow passing over the boat. The air was humid and

almost lifeless, but Keeler still felt a chill. The water beneath them was a vivid green from sunlight refracted off the sandy bottom, and murky with algae. Shoals of bait fish darted in and around the huge steel piers sunk into the bedrock. Vaulted trusses secured the platform overhead, and cantilevers held up the threatening overhang. Everywhere flakes of rust were built up on the metal like moss. The sound of the engines echoed underneath, and their own voices boomed back at them, hollow and tinny, like the steel drums in a calypso band. *Caliban* powered down almost to a standstill.

A twenty foot cigarette boat was tied up at what had once been a landing stage, but storms had battered the float and left it half submerged. A set of open-work stairs like a fire escape zigzagged down from the height of the platform above them. Something rang against the iron, an old paint can or a dropped wrench. Keeler looked up at the underside of the huge, eroding structure, but there was nothing to see. He felt claustrophobic.

Then a kid came bouncing down the steps, nimble and enthusiastic. The metal treads clattered. "Hey, guys," he called, grinning at them amiably. "*Hermanos*." He jumped into the cockpit of the cigarette boat.

Caliban's crew warped in to the speedboat and snugged up alongside. Slocum and Obregón were already standing at the top of the gangway, but Obregón seemed uncertain, as if he were waiting for a signal. He glanced up. Another man was coming down the water stairs. He was older than the kid, and he moved more gravely, less confident of his footing.

Obregón looked relieved to see him. Keeler figured they must know each other personally. He watched as the second man climbed into the speedboat and Obregón transferred safely aboard. They embraced awkwardly. The kid fired up the speedboat, the engines catching and the underwater exhaust rumbling. He clambered over the windscreen to cast off the bow lines. Obregón looked up at Slocum and sketched him a kind of salute. Keeler couldn't tell whether it was meant to be ironic or not. Slocum raised his hand negligently off the rail, returning Obregón's gesture.

The kid climbed back into the cockpit and took the controls.

"Until the next time then, captain," Obregón said.

Slocum looked at him a little sadly. "I'm afraid you've run out of time, major," he said.

Obregón's face went blank.

"I didn't even have to shop around," Slocum told him. "Your

old pals here, they'd already sold you out to the Colombians. I just contracted to deliver a warm body."

Obregón glanced contemptuously at the man who'd come to meet him and then looked back up at Slocum. "You whore," he said tightly. "You did it for the money."

"Any deal can be renegotiated," Slocum smiled.

"No one will trust you to keep your word now," Obregón said, and spat over the side.

"Everybody burns their bridges sometime," Slocum said with a shrug. He pulled a 9mm auto out from the small of his back and shot Obregón twice in the face, from fifteen feet away. Obregón's head jerked back, and he collapsed in a heap of bloody brains, a puppet with the strings cut.

Keeler stiffened with shock, and everything froze. For a moment time thickened and congealed, like wax.

Keeler felt a roaring in his ears, breathless and disorienting, and even the watery reflections playing over them like swimmers in a grotto seemed to falter and darken.

And then all hell broke loose.

The kid at the wheel of the speedboat gunned the controls, the engines shaking under load, and the cigarette boat shot out from under the gunwales. Auto-

matic weapons opened up on them from overhead. Bullets splintered and ricocheted off *Caliban's* superstructure, and the crew returned fire. Somebody was hit above them and pitched forward, falling the forty feet to the water below. *Caliban's* big diesels came to life, and she began getting under way, surprisingly agile for her size.

Keeler wasn't clear what was happening. He was too busy staying under cover.

There must have been at least three other shooters above them, firing from concealed positions on the catwalks and girders underneath the platform. Keeler crawled along, keeping his head down. Wild shots chewed up the deck and the bulkheads, and he shrank away. The noise was terrific, the sound of gunfire reverberating from all sides, amplified to a steady metallic crash.

Then they were out from under the platform, bathed in a silvery light. In the sudden vacuum of silence Keeler heard two things preternaturally clearly, the whine of a helicopter turbine and the Klaxon of a Coast Guard cutter. He saw the cutter first, bearing down on their beam, still a mile away but closing fast to intercept. Their deck guns were already uncovered and manned. The turbine noise

accelerated, the thud of rotor blades increased in pitch, and the chopper lifted off from the oil rig behind them. As it hovered for a second, Keeler saw the helicopter had no official insignia. It was a private charter, not Coast Guard, but it was obvious they meant to give chase, too.

The fans switched on, and *Caliban* began to aquaplane as the cushion lifted her in the water. She was already pushing a good fifteen knots.

The cutter was well out of hailing distance, but she fired a ranging shot. The shell whistled by them and blew a hole in the ocean.

"I think they mean business," Slocum yelled, staggering up to Keeler. He'd taken a gash on his forehead and his face was slippery with blood, but he was flushed with excitement and grinning like a maniac. The wind whipped past.

"You fixed it so they would," Keeler yelled back. "You blew the whistle yourself and told the Coast Guard where the exchange would take place. This is your ticket out."

"Yours, too," Slocum said. He started to move away.

Keeler caught his arm. "Those guys back there wouldn't have ambushed us if you'd handed Obregón over alive," he said. "The Cubans were just window dressing. It's the Colombians

who wanted to pull Obregón's fingernails out with hot pliers. They were waiting up on the platform."

Slocum glanced over his shoulder at the helicopter. "I guess they're pretty pissed off along about now," he said to Keeler, still grinning.

"Maybe you can outrun the cutter if they don't sink us, but you can't outrun the chopper," Keeler said.

"They're not armed," Slocum said. "They're just tagging along to see if there are any survivors."

"And that's the point of this whole charade?" Keeler demanded. "No survivors?"

"Just you, captain," Slocum told him.

They were both hanging onto the rail as the ship picked up speed. "You might get us all killed," Keeler said.

"I won't be safe until I'm dead," Slocum told him, pulling away.

"Scorched earth, no quarter, that's your exit strategy?" Keeler called after him.

"I don't have to take you down with me," Slocum yelled back. "Scuttle the ship, and live to tell the tale." He took the companionway to the upper deck two steps at a time.

The cutter fired on them again, raking the waterline with tracer rounds, but she was

falling back, and did little damage. The helicopter kept pace, maintaining an altitude of about three hundred meters.

Keeler made his way astern. *Caliban* was opening the distance from the cutter, but he heard an enormous whistle overhead and a white streak of smoke headed aft, toward the Coast Guard boat. It was a rocket-propelled grenade, or a hand-held guided missile, and luckily it missed, but Keeler knew you didn't open up on a U.S. flag vessel with an RPG or a Stinger. This time the Coast Guard skipper ordered his bow cannon to fire. A high explosive round hit amidships and tore half the flying bridge to splinters. Debris rained down on the deck as Keeler scrambled by.

They were still in the oilfield, without much room for evasive action, but they were up to thirty knots and Keeler knew *Caliban* had the edge on the cutter. There was also the hazard of old wellheads, pipeline, or reinforced concrete piers just below the surface. If they hit something submerged at the speed they were traveling, they'd tear the bottom out of the boat or capsize.

The comm center was deserted, the radar screens and navigational positions abandoned. The weapons locker had been emptied except for a couple of

.30 caliber grease guns. The heavier stuff was topside, and Keeler heard scattered small arms fire from the upper deck. He figured the cutter was too far off for it to have any effect.

Keeler found the detonator in the bottom of the cabinet where he'd left it, still wired. He wondered for a minute why Slocum hadn't set it off himself and then realized that Slocum himself had probably fired the RPG at the cutter as a provocation. He wanted *Caliban* attacked and the helicopter to see it destroyed. Another explosive round hit, landing short and in the water, close enough to make the hull shudder violently, but they were drawing out of range.

Keeler thought about the chopper hovering overhead. He thought about Major Obregón lying dead in a puddle of his own brains. He thought about how he was being used by Slocum. He remembered the dead dogs back at the boatyard in Key West. He didn't have the time to put it together. He yanked the handle of the detonator up, twisted it savagely, and punched it down. There was a huge crunch in the hold beneath him like a sustained shriek, and the boat settled abruptly, losing way and subsiding in the water, her advantage lost. Keeler felt saddened by it. A good ship de-

served better, and now she was a sitting duck.

He went back on deck. *Caliban* had taken on a severe list, and she was foundering at the bows. Her momentum still carried her forward, but she was slack with inertia, not responding to helm commands, and the cutter was fast overtaking her. Keeler grabbed a life jacket.

Keeler knew how badly *Caliban* was disabled. He didn't wait to see who else had figured it out. The cutter opened up on them again, and they weren't warning shots, but machine-gun fire and HE rounds, targeted to cripple them or sink the boat. *Caliban* wallowed broadside, taking on water faster than her emergency pumps could manage. Heavy slugs hammered into her. There was a sharp smell of ozone. Keeler clutched the life jacket and went over the side.

Using the life jacket as a flotation device, Keeler struck away from the failing vessel, kicking hard and keeping *Caliban* between him and the advancing cutter. The gunfire was steady now and he didn't think Slocum's crew was even shooting back, but it didn't matter. He wanted to make as much distance as he could. He didn't know if he'd been seen yet. The nearest old oil rig was a couple of hundred yards away. The shallow water was warm and

brackish, and thick with decaying vegetable matter. It smelled like rotted kelp, and Keeler tried to keep it out of his mouth and nose.

His waterlogged clothing was beginning to hamper him. He managed to push his shoes off and struggled to pull his wet sweater over his head, still kicking fiercely. The soggy life vest didn't have much buoyancy. Keeler plugged ahead, his breathing labored. He was almost halfway between *Caliban* and the oil rig. Seawater stung his eyes and nostrils, and he could feel himself beginning to stiffen. He bicycled his legs, working out the cramps, and then settled into a kid's paddle kick, sweeping with his arms. He was still aiming for distance, but trying for speed would only wear him out.

He'd made it over a hundred yards from *Caliban* when one of the cutter's rounds hit the fuel tank. Keeler felt the concussion through the water when it blew, as if a giant hand had slapped him. He glanced back over his shoulder and saw the boat shiver where she drifted, broken-backed, and then plume into an enormous fireball, sucking in the air around it like a hole in the sky. Keeler dived underwater. The shock wave and the heat from the blast flattened the surface and churned the water

below. Keeler tumbled and yawed in the turbulence, fighting to hold his breath. He broke water at last, gasping for air and trying to get his bearings. There was a shower of hot debris all around him, hissing when it hit the water, and some of the particles singed his hair and bare shoulders. Of the boat itself there was barely a trace, only an oily diesel slick and a slow centrifugal eddy, like water going down a drain.

Keeler rolled back over and made for the drilling rig.

He swam with careful, even strokes, saving his strength. The platform seemed farther away than it had before.

He was stuck there for a while as it turned out. He didn't want to call attention to himself, not at first. He waited until the helicopter gave up and moved away, heading for shore, and the cutter lowered a launch to look for survivors. Keeler didn't think they'd find anyone in the water.

He was crouched on the remains of a concrete abutment, just above the waterline, at the base of one of the heavy towers supporting the platform overhead. The cloud cover had burned off, and the sun beat down on the water, making it flicker like bronze. The light hurt his eyes. His damp khakis

steamed, and his skin was crusted with dried salt. He could feel it beginning to itch. He watched the Coast Guard boat quarter the area, sometimes fishing through the wreckage with a boathook, but he didn't see them pick anybody up. He knew they'd get around to him sooner or later. He hoped he'd be able to talk his way out of brig time when they did. His story was going to sound less than convincing.

Slocum had needed an excuse, and Keeler was it. Slocum's operation was shut down for good, and Slocum himself would now be presumed dead. Keeler wondered if he had really gotten away with it. There was a lot of money waiting for him somewhere, and a lot of open water for him to disappear into. Keeler

had gotten off the boat in time, and maybe Slocum had found a way, too. There'd always be a lingering suspicion that Slocum wasn't dead, but *Caliban* had been shot out of the water, and any physical evidence was at the bottom of the ocean.

Keeler didn't much want to be anybody's alibi, but he'd lived to tell the tale. Those were the fortunes of war, as Slocum had told him. The dead didn't have a voice. Only the living could bear witness.

Keeler's throat was raw from salt water. He could barely croak. He rose to his feet and waved both arms over his head until one of the crewmen on the Coast Guard boat caught sight of him, and the launch changed course and headed in his direction.

UNSOLVED

by
Robert Kesling

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the December issue.

It happened many years ago, at the time when Communists were seizing control of the Balkans. Wealthy landowners abandoned their extensive holdings to seek safety in America. The Plotchescu family was no exception.

Landing in the United States with little money, this resourceful family—grandfather, grandmother, father, mother, son, and daughter—put their outstanding athletic talents to use. The men were named Alexis, Boris, and Cyril; the women were Dorinda, Elena, and Fidelia. From the youngest at 14 to the oldest at 57 they were a determined group. They joined a circus, billing themselves as the Amazing Plotts.

They perfected a routine. First they marched in as a band, with each playing a different instrument: clarinet, drum, fife, mandolin, saxophone, and tuba.

The six next went into their acrobatics highlighted by their "Human Tower." The strongest man anchored his feet firmly in the sawdust; the next member of the troupe climbed up to stand upon his shoulders; then in succession each of the others launched himself or herself from a springboard, somersaulted in the air, and landed standing on the shoulders of the predecessor. The audience gasped as the last woman completed the "Tower" and waved triumphantly down.

Their specialty, however, was the high wire. One man carried a younger woman on his shoulders across the slack wire. The other four crossed individually: one blindfolded, one riding a unicycle, another doing back flips all the way, and the last one juggling five tenpins.

As the finale the Plotts returned to the arena as clowns, their "names" prominently displayed on the backs of their colorful suits: Bo-bo, Do-do, Jo-jo, No-no, So-so, and Yo-yo. The crowds loved them.

The family was beginning to feel safe from the old threats. Then a

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new ringmaster took over one night and asked personal, probing questions. After a hurried conference, the Plotts decided that the show must go on.

(1) Of four of the troupe, So-so is 21 years older than the saxophone player, and the drummer is 21 years older than the one who does back flips on the high wire.

(2) The three women include Dorinda, the one playing the fife, and the one who crosses the high wire blindfolded. One is 56.

(3) The three men include Boris, the one playing the mandolin, and Jo-jo the clown. One is 36, and one is 15.

(4) The "Human Tower" consists (from bottom to top) of the strongest man, Do-do, the person playing the clarinet, Bo-bo, the one who plays the tuba, and the one who crosses the high wire on a unicycle. The juggler is the second person above No-no. Elena is above the woman carried across the high wire on the shoulders of a man.

(5) Neither Alexis nor the high wire juggler is Bo-bo the clown.

(6) The unicyclist is not the 56-year-old woman.

(7) The drummer is not Yo-yo the clown.

(8) At last, time for the clowns! Do-do, No-no, and Yo-yo include the person who crosses the high wire blindfolded, the mandolin player, and the oldest member of the troupe.

The show is almost over when the new ringmaster throws a knife into the back of No-no the clown and dashes for the exit. He doesn't reach it. The quick-thinking juggler picks up one of his tenpins and in one throw fells the attacker as Boris cheers.

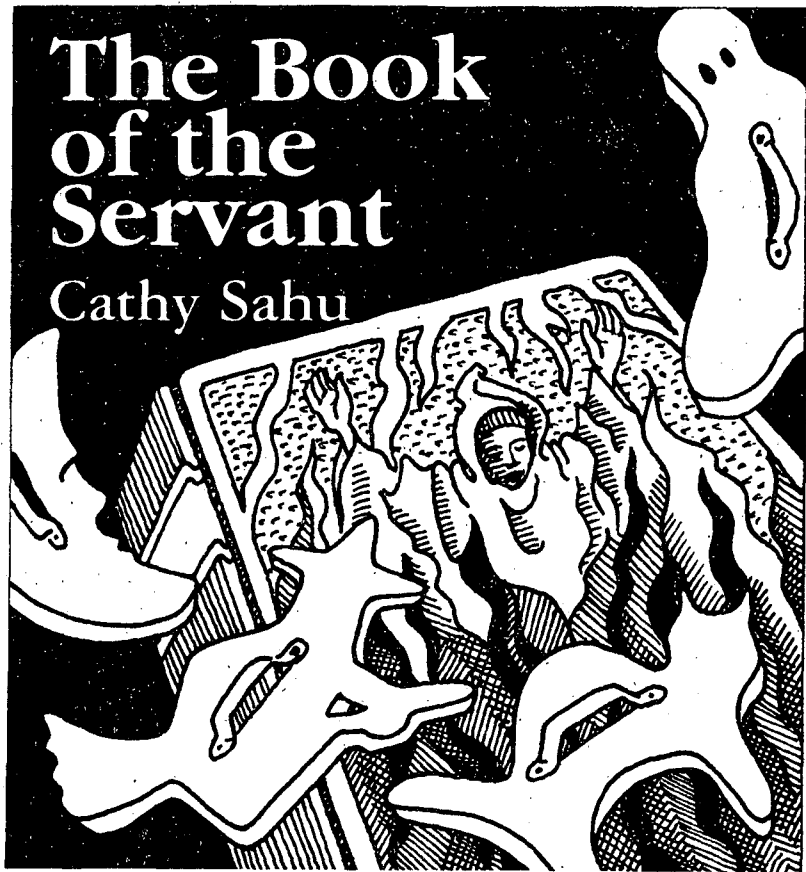
Fortunately for No-no, the thick padding of her clown suit prevented serious injury.

Which member of the Amazing Plotts was attacked?

Who brought down the would-be assassin?

The Book of the Servant

Cathy Sahu



“So your old man died, eh?” Mrs. Benninghoven asked the woman who had just sat down in her office. They were waiting for a new pot of coffee to finish brewing. “What a shame. He was a very nice old man.”

“Yes, he was,” replied Elsie

Spry, a neat, middle-aged woman, chubby and perhaps a bit homely but cheerful and pleasant, a housekeeper by trade and employed by Benninghoven’s Caregiving Services on a case-by-case basis. They were discussing her last client. “But it was more than time for him to



go," Elsie continued with philosophical regret. "Ninety-six he was, believe it or not, and very tired those last few weeks. He would just sit in his chair, watching the leaves fall—" She fluttered her fingers poetically downward. "Lost his desire to eat, and didn't like being wheeled outside for his walks any more, which he used to enjoy so much. I think he was just as glad to go."

"The nurses told me you were a great help to them in lifting the patient and such, and they praised your cooking to the heavens," said Mrs. Benninghoven. Elsie smiled a bit complacently.

"Now let's see what I have available for you next," Mrs. Benninghoven continued, opening her schedule book. The coffee having finished brewing, Elsie got up and poured them two cups of the stuff, hot and black. She had stopped by the bakery on her way in and now brought out a pink box in which sat four large, plump blueberry muffins with crystal sugar sprinkled on top.

"Oh, how nice; thank you," said Mrs. Benninghoven, taking a blueberry muffin in a napkin. "I have nothing open right now," she said slowly, nibbling. "But a young couple expecting their first baby will be needing some— one . . . though the due date is in

early November, and of course there's no knowing when exactly . . ."

"That may add up to several weeks of unemployment for me," Elsie put in, "this being only October, which would be a bit hard. Don't you have anything sooner?"

"Well, something might come in any day, of course, especially if we get an early snow. We always have a few slips and breaks call in when the freezing weather begins."

"But it's looking very mild," objected Elsie, leaning over and peering into Mrs. Benninghoven's schedule book. "What about that one there?" she asked, pointing to a note scribbled in the square for last Thursday, October twelfth.

"Oh, that." Mrs. Benninghoven frowned. "I was planning on ignoring that one, to tell you the truth. Mr. Parsloe. He's looking for a housekeeper only, no nursing involved, which suits you. But he's really too much trouble."

Elsie leaned back, laughing dismissively, "You and I have both dealt with plenty of those before, Mrs. B. If I refused all troublesome clients, I'd be standing in the welfare line this very minute."

"Oh, I'm not simply saying that Mr. Parsloe is crabby or demanding," said Mrs. Benning-

hoben, a bit ruffled by the implied aspersion against her toughness. "I wouldn't have gotten where I am today if I weren't able to deal with that sort of thing quite effectively, if I do say so myself. But last year we had a different kind of problem. This Mr. Parsloe called in saying that one of our girls had stolen money from him."

"Oh dear. And had she?"

"I never knew the girl very well. That was the first time we'd used her, though she had very good references. And I didn't get the chance to question her because she ran off after that, which does point to her having been guilty. But I found Mr. Parsloe very unpleasant to deal with. He accused me of hiring people off the street! And when I suggested that he should have contacted me first before confronting the girl, and that at any rate the police would have to be notified, he became very angry—he cursed me and threatened to sue."

Elsie murmured shock and disapproval.

"Now, after several months, he calls me again, requesting another girl. But besides that," continued Mrs. Benninghoven, "there's something about that man. He's . . . creepy. He lives alone in a big house, very old—pre-Revolutionary, I believe. It's

been in the family for generations. And they were all very odd people. He is the last of the line and, it seems to me, the oddest. They say he writes books on his family's history, on local history . . . and on the history of witchcraft."

"Oh, how exciting," said Elsie gleefully. "The perfect place to spend Halloween."

"If you like that sort of thing . . ."

"And I do," replied Elsie. "There's nothing I love better than a good ghost story or for that matter a tale of witchcraft. And I do need the work. Let me have the assignment, Mrs. B., and I'll be grateful to you."

"If you insist," said Mrs. Benninghoven, looking doubtful but picking up the phone.

Mr. Parsloe seemed more than amenable. In fact, he came straight away to pick Elsie up from the agency, drove her to fetch her luggage at the location of her previous assignment, and took her home with him then and there. He seemed eager to dispel any bad impression he might have given the agency originally. And this would indeed be a good place to spend Halloween in, Elsie thought as Mr. Parsloe sped his little Karmann Ghia up a long sylvan drive to a clearing where



stood a house of the type that is called saltbox: large and square, three stories tall, and bare as last year's Christmas tree. The windows looked down at Elsie bleakly, and dry leaves scuttled over the empty front porch. Not a very welcoming aspect, she said to herself, but maybe we can do something about that before the children arrive.

"Do you get a lot of children here, Mr. Parsloe?" she called to him as he lifted her suitcases out of the trunk.

"Children! What do you mean?" he demanded, looking around him quickly.

"I meant for Halloween. Do a lot of children stop by here for trick-or-treat?"

"Oh!" he laughed nervously. "No, not many. None at all, in fact. We're a bit set apart here."

"Well, we'll just have to work harder at attracting them, then. Once they taste my sugar cookies, word will spread, and we'll have the whole town here Halloween night."

"How lovely," Mr. Parsloe murmured. "Elsie, I want you to make yourself at home here. Feel free to do what you like and make use of things as you see fit. You don't need to tell me anything about your arrangements," he continued, fitting the key in the front door lock, "just take whatever you want." He looked down at her for a mo-

ment through the tiny round lenses of his spectacles, looking for all the world like an owl about to swoop. But he only nodded his head several times for emphasis and, stepping aside, let her in the front door.

Elsie spent the next few days settling into a comfortable routine. It was a very easy assignment, really: Mr. Parsloe ate his main meal in the evenings, not wanting breakfast or lunch. Even at his late supper he ate very little. Elsie would cook up a nice juicy roast or a good large cut of steak, dressed with a bit of potato and green and yellow veggies, and end up having most of it herself the next day. The housework took almost no time. Though there were many rooms in the house, they were very lightly furnished; vacuuming and dusting were over quickly. So, after quite a bit of heavy-duty scrubbing the first day or two to get the kitchen in proper shape and a bit of work getting her garret bedroom on the third floor comfy and cosy, she was free to spend most of her time as she liked. Many women would have been bored, but Elsie made a game of adapting to the changes in her environment that her profession frequently necessitated. She could always find something interesting to do and had already gotten into the


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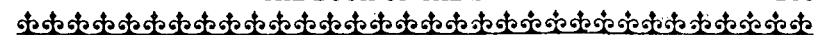
habit of walking the mile to town every day to do her grocery shopping and visit the library, talking to the children along the way and stopping to chat with old Mr. Jones, retired from the post office, and his friends, who sat on a bench outside the market when the weather was kind enough to allow.

As for Mr. Parsloe's day, he rarely had visitors, rarely went out, and spent most of his time upstairs, where his bedroom and study were located. He got up very late in the morning and stayed up very late at night. A few times when Elsie had occasion to get up in the middle of the night to get a cup of cocoa or to make double-sure she had turned off the stove, she saw the light still burning in his study off the stairs and heard him talking to himself, sometimes quite loudly, in some uncouth but sonorous foreign language. He must have been in the habit of lighting a fire in the fireplace because the light that fell upon the carpet on the stair had a red glow and a flicker to it. Elsie couldn't be sure what went on in there, as he had directed her not to clean the room; he would do it himself. He didn't want his books displaced, he'd said. While Mr. Parsloe's voice rose and fell those evenings upon the stair, sounding quite foreign and wild, sometimes angry, sometimes

wheeling, a shadow passed and repassed, blocking out the square of red light on the carpet at rhythmic intervals, as if he were pacing or dancing slowly around the room. All was quiet; his shadow seemed to stoop, then rise, arms raised, and the chanting began again. No wonder he had a reputation, Elsie thought, scurrying by. It was really something straight out of M. R. James.

One morning while Mr. Parsloe was still asleep, Elsie, standing with her cup of coffee and looking out the kitchen window, took notice for the first time of the little plot of land directly below her. It was enclosed by a stone wall six feet high all round and at one time would have been the kitchen garden though nothing but weeds grew there now. A little hut fashioned of stones and windowless, the original use of which was unclear, stood at the far end. It might have been for storing produce or meats, although it seemed a bit low and narrow for such purposes. The doorway was only four feet high. Still, if the garden were brought back, the hut could be put to use as a storage shed.

No sooner thought of than acted upon. Elsie bundled up against the morning chill and,



finding a few rusty but serviceable digging implements in the garage, proceeded to put in a few hours of strenuous digging up and turning over the hard soil. Good exercise, and next spring there would be fresh vegetables—if she were still here, of course. If not, someone else would bless her for her labors. Finally she straightened up and looked around her. That was enough for today; she had cut quite a swath. Picking up her spade and pitchfork, Elsie thought of the stone hut again. She might stow the tools there until tomorrow. But when she ambled over to see about it, she found that the wooden door had been shut up with a large, heavy padlock.

Making a mental note to ask Mr. Parsloe for the key, Elsie trudged back into the house. Tomato soup and corn muffins would be nice for lunch, with a sandwich made from that beautiful cut of beef Mr. Parsloe had hardly touched last night. Really, he seemed to eat less and less each day, Elsie thought. A nervous constitution, and no wonder, with his lifestyle—the sun past its meridian, as her father used to say, and he, Mr. Parsloe that is, still in bed. She pulled off her sweater and beret and carried them into the front hallway to the closet where they were kept. There she noticed some-

thing lying on the floor of the hallway closet—a twenty dollar bill. It had evidently fallen out of Mr. Parsloe's coat at some time or other, though she hadn't noticed it when she took her sweater out that morning . . . but then, the coat hangers had been tangled together and she had had difficulty getting her sweater out. Maybe she herself had knocked the money down from one of his coat pockets. At any rate it definitely wasn't hers. She picked it up and placed it on the hallway table.

"Ha ha!" laughed Mr. Parsloe that evening when Elsie reminded him of the twenty dollar bill, lying on the hallway table still. "I didn't have any idea I had lost it. I have so much money, Elsie, and my wants are so few, as you can see. I don't know what to do with it all, and certainly never miss it once it's taken—I mean, lost."

"Well, Mr. Parsloe, you should put it in the bank, then," replied Elsie. "It's not right to be careless with money. You might need it someday, and besides, you might put some poor soul in the way of temptation."

"Temptation! You don't believe any of that Ten Commandment stuff, do you, Elsie?"

"Of course I do, Mr. Parsloe," she replied in a grave voice, and refused to say anything more.

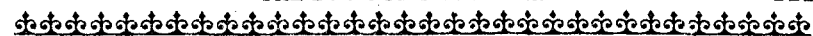
But through the ensuing week

there were many more occasions on which Elsie could have delivered the same lecture—and would have had she felt it would fall on anything but deaf ears. Mr. Parsloe seemed to be an inveterate money dropper, a sort of shedding King Midas. She found everything from quarters on the stairs to rolls of bills tucked into old flower vases. And there were other valuables, too: a pair of gold earrings lying in a candy dish and a cameo brooch under a rocker cushion. Even more surprising, every time she put the money or jewelry or whatnot on the hallway table and told Mr. Parsloe at dinner that night what she had found and where, he became more and more testy until he seemed positively angry with her, as if it were her fault that he was so careless! Finally she stopped telling him. When she found money or anything else where it shouldn't be, she just dropped it into the large Chinese vase that sat on the table in the hall and didn't say anything about it.

Certainly the character of her new employer added a piquant flavor to her otherwise gentle routine. One early morning when Elsie was outside digging, as was now her custom, in the kitchen garden, she heard one of the second story windows being pushed up and saw Mr. Parsloe

leaning out waving one hand, in which he held a book, and shouting at her in an agitated manner. Soon he came down, looking very odd with his clothes disheveled as if he hadn't been to bed yet, and demanded an explanation of just what exactly she was doing there. Determined to appear uncowed, she told him she was just preparing the soil for throwing down a few vegetable seeds, which would come up nicely in the spring, and by the way, could he give her the key to the stone shed against the wall there, that would be just the place to store tools. Here Mr. Parsloe seemed to make a great attempt to control himself. Under no circumstances must Elsie go anywhere near that stone hut, he said, his voice shaking. It was unsafe and might tumble onto her head. At any rate, he had lost the key to the door. And as for the digging, the ground was practically frozen now, and he really must forbid her to come into this yard any more—until spring, at least.

Really, thought Elsie as she trudged back to the garage, Mr. Parsloe had become as nervous as a cat. She had never worked for such an odd gentleman, though for the most part he did give her quite a bit of freedom. And he was right, the weather



was turning a bit frosty. Winter was coming—tomorrow was Halloween, as a matter of fact. Well, most of her digging was finished, there was plenty of room for the corn, beans, and other vegetables she planned, and Mr. Parsloe would never know if she quietly planted a few seeds. She went inside, changed into her coat, and, retrieving her library book, went out the front door and started walking toward the town.

In town, she bought a few ingredients she still needed for her sugar cookie dough, which she would make this afternoon and refrigerate overnight, to be rolled out and pressed into shapes tomorrow. She reminded the children she saw playing along the way to be sure to come see her on their trick-or-treat route. In front of the market she sat down on the bench beside old Mr. Jones, showed him her groceries, and said she would make extra cookies to bring to him the day after Halloween.

But Mr. Jones shook his head and looked skeptical about the town children coming to the Parsloe house at any time for any reason. "Mr. Parsloe is not well liked here," he said, and would elucidate no further, saying that he didn't like to gossip. But it took very little coaxing on Elsie's part to get the whole story. There had been a couple of

incidents in which people who had crossed Mr. Parsloe, and whom Mr. Parsloe was heard to have threatened, had come, sooner or later, to a bad end. Actually, two of the people involved were missing and presumed dead: Mr. Parsloe's old high school gym teacher and a girl who had broken off her engagement with him. The more simpleminded folks thought it was a case of witchcraft, but others, Mr. Jones included, believed the whole thing was purely coincidence. There was reason to suspect the gym teacher had fallen drunk into the river, and the girl, who had always been flighty, was probably in Hollywood right now trying to become a movie star. Still, Elsie should not take it personally if she had a lot of cookies left over on All Saints' Day, and he'd be glad to help her finish them up, certainly. "And be glad you don't have to worry about any tricksters coming and soaping your windows or turning your outhouse over," he teased.

When Elsie got to the library, she was disappointed to find it already closed; she had forgotten about the early hours they kept on Fridays. She could keep the book she'd planned to drop off to read one more day, but it wasn't very good. It was an anthology of ghost stories; she had read all the good ones before in



other books, and the rest were just fluff. So she dropped the book into the return slot and started home.

At home she mixed her cookie dough—a quadruple batch—wrapped it in waxed paper, and set it inside the refrigerator. Mr. Parsloe must have gone back to sleep, if he had been to bed at all when they had their run-in that morning. Except for her own brisk movements the house was still. She prepared his evening meal, set the table, then, in search of something to do, wandered upstairs.

On the second story landing she came upon the book he had been waving at her that morning, lying precariously upon the window ledge, still open. With some difficulty she pulled the sash closed again and picked up the book. The binding bore a Latin title. She had learned a little Latin in high school many years ago. Sitting down on the ledge, she tried to puzzle out what exactly might be inside. The title she soon realized meant *The Book of the Servant*, and encouraged by this initial success, she turned to the first chapter.

This seemed to be some kind of history, quoting passages from ancient Greek and Hebrew writings, of the summoning forth of spirits by various means

and for various purposes. The frontispiece was a woodcut of a gentleman in robes standing with arms raised above billows of smoke between which could be seen flames and the naked form, black and stooping, of some sort of medieval monster, half animal, half man.

The second chapter seemed to get into the specifics of how such events could be arranged.

"If a man has many enemies," Elsie made out in one of the paragraphs, "he is called unfortunate by those who do not know . . ." (something she couldn't quite make out). "But the Servant will come to do his master's bidding, and the man will see his enemy's blood. In truth it is well for such a man to have many enemies, for each year those who have done true evil to his person or property may be marked and the Servant called down upon them. But if there is no such enemy, or if the enemy marked is innocent, then woe to the master, for the Servant, though not called, will yet come and demand his wage."

This must be one of the books Mr. Parsloe studies for his history of witchcraft, said Elsie to herself, putting the book back down on the windowsill. Very interesting, but just that little paragraph took me fifteen minutes to translate. I wonder what Sister Bernadette would think

of me now. And she went off to see what was on TV.

She did not see Mr. Parsloe at all for the rest of that day. He must have slept all day and then once again stayed up all night; the only thing she saw of him that evening was his shadow crossing and recrossing the red square of light upon the stair as usual. He was murmuring or singing to himself more earnestly than before, with an intensity that struck her as quite ridiculous. A grown man whining to himself in that way! she thought as she went down for her cocoa. Like a child nagging his father for treats. Who did he think was going to answer him?

The next morning, coming back from her usual trip to town, Elsie happened to glance at the stone shed in the yard and noticed that the padlock was not just unlocked but missing completely now. How odd, Elsie thought. Here the man warns me against going in there and then goes in himself and forgets to lock up again. She trudged over to the shed and started to pull the door open. But the hinges looked very weak and the weeds grew thick against it, so she decided to leave it alone. And what was that sound? Elsie seemed to hear something moving around inside the shed, right behind the door. Not a skunk, hopefully!

Better to leave well enough alone. She went back into the house.

Despite his late night Mr. Parsloe came down at his usual time that afternoon, very mild and smiling weakly though red-eyed and pale. He jumped when Elsie asked him if he wanted his dinner now, though she was standing right in front of him, and then he replied that he wanted only coffee.

"I'm feeling very guilty, Elsie," he finally started hesitantly, "about how I treated you yesterday . . . it was yesterday, wasn't it? When I shouted at you about the garden?"

Elsie told him she hadn't minded at all, though he did seem a little wracked with nerves and she would suggest he take something more than just black coffee.

"I'll have something later," he said, waving his hand impatiently. "Let me say that I have been haunted by a deep remorse ever since that unfortunate incident. Though I still warn you—ask you, that is—to stay away from the garden and the shed, it is for your own good." He grimaced. "I have become entirely too dependent on your skillful ministrations to allow any harm to come to you, you see. I think you told me, Elsie, that you've been suffering from arthritis?"

"My knees and ankles have

been giving me some trouble lately, yes," Elsie admitted.

"Well, let me give you this," said Mr. Parsloe, pulling out of his pocket a chain upon which hung a heavy medallion with a large, dark red stone in the center. "The wearing of this stone was said by certain medieval practitioners to be a cure for arthritis, and I have in my own studies found that these medieval doctors are, more often than not, right on the money. Wear it continuously for twenty-four hours, and I promise you you will feel a marked improvement."

"Why, thank you, Mr. Parsloe," Elsie said, slipping the chain over her head. It was very ugly. She would wear it to humor him—but for twenty-four hours only.

"By the way, what's that on your forehead?" Mr. Parsloe asked in a carefully nonchalant voice. Before she could move, he had held up a trembling hand and touched her forehead with one thumb. She felt something cold and sticky being smeared upon her skin. "Oh dear, what did I do now?" said Mr. Parsloe with exaggerated chagrin as Elsie ran to the little mirror that hung beside the kitchen door. "I thought I saw a speck of something on your forehead, but look at my hand. I must have accidentally dipped it in something

when I was taking out the medallion—there were some little pots of salve in the same cupboard. I'm so sorry. Will it come off, do you think?"

Elsie got a paper towel and a little soap but couldn't wash off the bright carnelian smear that now adorned her forehead like a red star. The more she rubbed, the more soiled with red grease the paper towel became, but the spot was in no way less lustrous. She was really beginning to feel a little irritated now. It would probably wear off in a few days, but what would people think in the meantime? She looked like some kind of heathen idol, a Hindu goddess of pots and pans.

She had to tell Mr. Parsloe it was all right, of course. He apologized a few times more as he gulped down his coffee, then rose unsteadily to his feet and made his way back upstairs.

**T**he morning had been bright, and Elsie had taken her daily walk downtown in sunshine, but now a cold wind had blown in and drawn a dark mantle over the sky. Elsie knew the best place to be in this type of weather was a kitchen, and the best thing to be doing there was baking. She took out her sugar cookie dough and set up her rolling board, pin, and flour on





the kitchen table. Then she took out her heirloom set of cookie cutters, which she carried with her from job to job, and selected the ones with a Halloween theme: a crescent moon, a witch on a broomstick, an arch-backed cat, and two ghosts, one big and one little. The lamp spread a cheery butter-yellow light over the table, and the oven, carefully preheated, made the room so toasty she threw off her sweater. The color of her cheeks soon matched the blotch on her forehead, making her look like a matrushka doll.

She worked until nightfall and then sat back with a cup of tea. A bright orange and black foil sign exclaimed *Happy Halloween* upon the kitchen door and the porch light was on, but Elsie waited in vain: no little ones came, nor big ones, not even any teenagers. She moved to the armchair in the sitting room, curled up with *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary*, and promptly fell asleep.

Several hours later she woke up, cramped, realizing that it was very late now—Halloween was almost over, and no one had come at all. Mr. Parsloe had never come down for his dinner, either. She got up, stretched her stiff limbs, and climbed the stairs to his study door, which was, counter to his custom, closed, though she could hear

him chanting, low and delirious tonight. She knocked.

The chanting stopped, but Mr. Parsloe did not open the door. After a moment she heard him whisper in a choked voice close to the keyhole, "Who's there?"

"Did you want any supper, Mr. Parsloe?" Elsie called.

"I'm sorry, Elsie, but I can't possibly open this door!" Mr. Parsloe fairly shrieked, though Elsie had suggested no such thing.

"But I was just asking—"

"No, I can't, I can't possibly open the door!" he cried. "I have too much to do, please don't ask me, and please don't come knocking again!"

And so for some reason Mr. Parsloe had now taken to barricading himself within his study. Odder and odder, Elsie thought. She would call the agency tomorrow and see whether they could send over a good doctor—a mental one.

Downstairs again, she looked around the kitchen. Eleven thirty already, and a tinful of sugar cookies that would have to be given away, not to mention a tableful of dirty mixing bowls, cookie cutters, and the like. How shameful of her to have slept so long. It would not do to leave them till tomorrow when the sugar dough would be hardened solid. She filled the sink with soapy water and began washing.

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The minutes ticked away. She turned the radio on to country music, which she thought would have a cheerful sound, but it seemed all twang and whine tonight. The classical music station, which she turned to next, sounded desolate and dreary and out of tune. Mr. Parsloe's skittishness was beginning to affect her, perhaps. Maybe when she called tomorrow, she would also ask for another assignment. Well, no use thinking about it right now; in the morning she might feel entirely different. That music wasn't helping; at any rate. It struck her as positively discordant. And what was that odd smell? Maybe something had got into the garbage can outside. Tomorrow she would probably have a not-so-pleasant surprise to clean up. She reached over to switch the radio off, and that's when she heard the noise at the kitchen door.

This was a Dutch door, the upper part of which had panes of glass, and though she had turned off the porch light, she could see the outline of a short figure upon the stoop. A trick-or-treater, Elsie thought as she wiped her hands and hurried to open the door. A little late maybe, but better late than never.

The attentive reader will perhaps at this point question the likelihood of Elsie's doing any-

thing so foolhardy as scurrying over and opening the kitchen door like that, under those circumstances and at that particular hour—"the witching hour," as it is termed. Elsie, being a voracious consumer of ghost and horror stories, should have been especially careful, the reader might contend. But I maintain that her behavior, though admittedly unwise, was consistent with her psychology. A person who steeps herself in the supernatural learns to ignore her overactive imagination. I contend that a person like Elsie is actually more susceptible to the eerie—to the eldritch—than the average person who reads cookbooks or hot rod magazines.

At any rate, Elsie opened the door. The dark shape stood silent upon the stoop as she cried out gaily how it had startled her and how frightened she was. It really was a very clever costume, clever especially in its reserve of detail—most of the figure was shrouded in a rough black cloak, leaving nothing uncovered except the forearms and face. But as she looked more closely, Elsie became disturbed: either this was a costume the likes of which she had never seen before, or the child really was deformed. How did it stoop like that, with its back almost horizontal, as if perfectly



capable of running away on all fours? And the hands, the fingers of which were impossibly long and thin—their movements so agile, so impatient. And that mask over the face—the eye sockets were deep and dark, but out of the one on the left something was lazily crawling . . .

"Oh my Lord, help me!" Elsie cried as she backed up against a chair and fell huddled into a corner. The thing approached noiselessly and bent over her, holding its face very near hers, breathing upon her a most repulsive scent of mold and decay. She covered her eyes with her hands but could feel the thing pick up the medallion from her chest and handle it in its clever, spiderlike fingers, turning it over and over. Suddenly Elsie felt a sharp tug against the back of her neck, and she blacked out.

With dawn she awoke to find herself lying flat on the kitchen floor. The door beside her was still ajar; through it the raucous sounds of early birdsong came. Before she even got up Elsie knew it was best not to think about what had happened last night, or to try to go up the stairs to see if . . .

She got to her feet and tottered out the door, down the

driveway, and onto the main road to town.

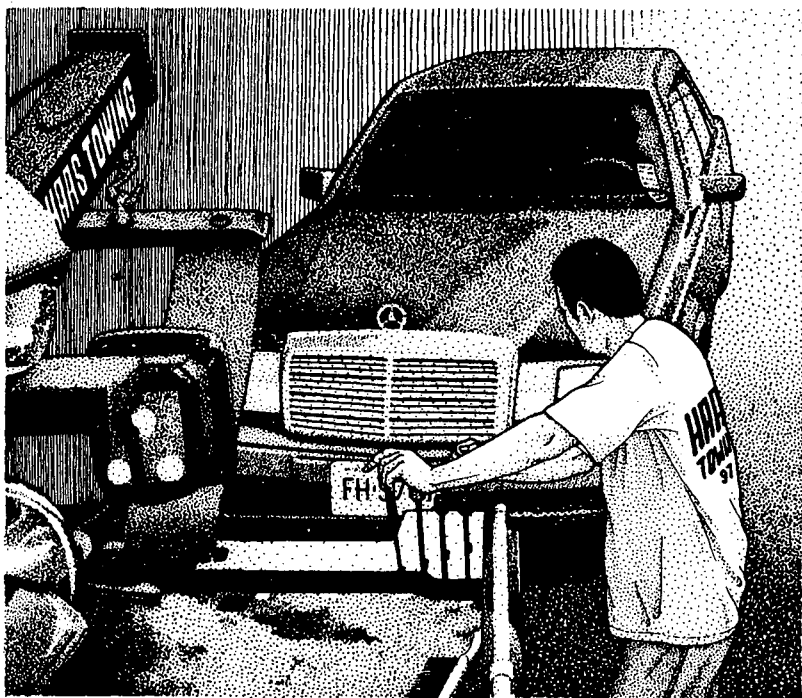
The sheriff came later that morning, after Elsie had made her report (her sister, a farmwife in a neighboring state, had said she would come and take Elsie home with her). Entering through the open kitchen door and mounting the stairs, he found the door to Mr. Parsloe's study open, with no signs of forced entry. No sign of Mr. Parsloe himself; no sign of a crime's having been committed—until, going out to see if Mr. Parsloe's car was still in the garage, he noticed the little stone shed. Just for the sake of thoroughness he pulled open the low door and peered in, then got out his flashlight. A bundle thrown into one corner bore a striking resemblance to Mr. Parsloe, though the face of the Mr. Parsloe the sheriff knew had always worn a superior little smirk and this face was frozen in an attitude of great dread or terror. There was a thick red smear of blood in the center of the forehead, and the head lay in unnatural relation to the chest, upon which the sheriff's flashlight caught the glint of a heavy gold disk with a dark red stone, and a broken chain.

Mr. Parsloe lay in this most uncomfortable manner upon a couch of old, gnawed bones. □

FICTION

The Materializing Corpse

Steven C. Levi



Captain Noonan, the "Bearded Holmes" of the Seattle police department, was seated at the corner table of Lorenzo's Grill over-

looking the dark and filthy backwaters of Elliot Bay and waiting for his wife when he got the nod from Luigi—at least according to his name

Illustration by Friedrich Haas

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 11/97

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tag—who looked more like a Robert or Harold, didn't speak Italian, and couldn't tell the difference between linguini and penne. Lorenzo's was a great place to eat if you liked the clientele, mostly Italian-Americans who wanted authentic dishes of the old country and didn't mind sitting at tables with red and white checkered cloths and sprinkling salt with a table knife from a cellar. Chianti was the primary elixir, and if you couldn't read Italian, you couldn't read the menu. Luigi didn't need to read the menu because he was the bartender.

"You've got a call, captain. You can take it in the office."

Noonan was well known in Lorenzo's. The food was excellent, the wine dependable, the clientele friendly without being boorish, and, most important, very few people knew of the place, much less that he could frequently be found there. This led him to the logical conclusion that the individual on the phone was his wife, primarily because she was the only one who knew where he was and, second, because she was always fifteen minutes late. As she was fifteen minutes late at this precise moment, she was clearly calling to tell him she was on her way.

"Yes, my love, I know. You want me to order the calamari

appetizer and have another glass of chianti."

"No. Actually I'd like you tell me how a corpse can get into a locked car that's traveling at thirty-five miles an hour."

"That's a pretty good trick, and this is not my wife."

"You're right on both counts. This is Freesia Harrison. I'm a public defender in a town you've never heard of but it's near Detroit."

"Isn't everything in Michigan near Detroit?"

"Sometimes it seems that way. I'm sorry to bother you like this, but I have a client who is in a bit of a pickle."

"You're a public defender, and you've only got one client who's in a pickle?"

"Let's just say this is one is pretty clearly innocent as opposed to my other clients, who are just run-of-the-mill badly misunderstood individuals who have run afoul of a racist system in which they . . ."

"Save the polemics for the courtroom, Ms. Harrison."

"Certainly. Your wife . . ."

"That I guessed."

"Basically, captain, I've got a client with a story so bizarre it has to be true."

"I've heard that before."

"This story, I assure you, is different. He's got a bail hearing tomorrow at two, and I'm look-

ing for some kind of an explanation to give the judge."

"Go ahead and state the problem. But be quick, I've got a wife on the way here."

"Not yet, sir. She said to tell you to order the calamari appetizer..."

"... and have another glass of chianti," Noonan cut in. Luigi looked up from his *Post-Intelligencer*, and Noonan nodded at him. "I've been here before. Now, your problem?"

"My client, Harold Holliman, is a tow-truck operator, the kind who is hired to go around town and remove cars that have been abandoned, have too many parking tickets, are blocking alleys, that kind of thing. Two days ago he jacked up a car that had fifteen outstanding tickets and dragged the vehicle into the city's impound yard. When he got there and lowered the car, a dead body was in the front seat. It wasn't there when he jacked the car up half an hour earlier."

"The dead body just appeared?" Noonan nodded a thanks as Luigi brought him a glass of chianti.

"Just appeared."

"Why is he so sure the body wasn't there before he lifted the car off the ground?"

"It couldn't have been. It was on the front seat, and Holliman had to get into the car to release

the parking brake."

"How did he get into the car?"

"Passkey. He's got those kind of keys."

"He made no stops?"

"None other than at red lights and stop signs."

"How many did he go through?"

"Oh, I'd say six or seven."

"And you checked for secret compartments and trapdoors in the car?"

Harrison laughed. "It's just a regular Mercedes 210 with regular seats and a regular trunk and no trapdoors in the floor, doors, or ceiling."

"Tell me about Holliman." Noonan dragged the phone as far as the cord would allow and sat down on a barstool. Luigi handed him a basket of garlic bread.

"Holliman admittedly is a smalltime operator. This isn't the first time he's run afoul of the law, but it's probably the first time he's innocent."

"What's he been run in for?"

"Gambling, dealing in stolen property, credit card fraud."

"A regular citizen, eh?"

"Yeah, my usual client. But murder is not his cup of tea."

"You don't have a sterling defendant, Ms. Harrison. Who's the corpse?"

"Good question. Latino male about fifty, clean-shaven, black hair, one hundred forty-five

pounds, dressed in an expensive three-piece silk suit. All labels have been removed from the clothing. Nothing in any pockets."

"Fingerprints?"

"No match yet."

"Shoes?"

"Funny you should ask. Black tennis shoes. Not as in jogging or aerobic shoes, but walking footgear."

"Belt?"

"Leather. It didn't have a hidden compartment."

"How was he killed?"

"Two slugs to the chest from a .38. There were no exit wounds. He died instantly. He was found on his back in the front seat. There was a little bit of blood on the seat but drops, not cups."

Noonan frowned and took a sip of the chianti. "Okay. What about the car?"

"Owned by a lawyer, of all people. Charles Harrison Sibley III. Old money. Father's a doctor, as in medical, and mother's a socialite. Family's probably worth ten to fifteen mill. Only son."

"He lives at home?"

"And what a home. Up on what we call Pill Hill. Where the wealthy people live. Yeah, he lives at home as in the guest-house, all three thousand square feet of it."

"What's his story? Why all the tickets?"

"Sibley thinks he's God's gift to mankind. He parks where he damn well pleases and then fights the tickets in court. It doesn't cost him anything and ties up the system, so no one downtown pushes it. The meter maids give him the tickets, and the traffic people lose his file rather than keep going to court."

"Then how'd Holliman choose that particular car to pick up?"

"The city has a list of license plates of hot cars."

"As in stolen?"

"Right. And as in having lots of parking tickets. Holliman didn't know whose car he was picking up. It was parked in an alley, and someone thought it was suspicious. Holliman got the call, ran the plates, and found it to be a hot car. He didn't know it was Sibley's."

"Would he have known to leave it be if he had known it was Sibley's car?"

"He does now."

Noonan laughed. "Okay. I think you're looking in the wrong direction in this case. The key isn't how the body got there, it's why the body was discovered in Sibley's car. Run a check on Sibley, credit as well as criminal. Don't forget to run a public access search. Also run those checks in Ohio and Indiana; those states are nearby, aren't they?"

"Sort of."

"And Canada is just across a river, isn't it?"

"Right. Ontario."

"Run through your Canadian sources as well. Run Holliman's name, too; let's cover all the bases."

"That's going to take some time."

"Good. My wife just walked in. A couple more things before you hang up. How long has the towing company been in business, and how long has Holliman worked there? Was it Holliman's last pickup of his shift? Was Holliman searched when the police arrested him? Why was Sibley's car parked in the alley? Does Sibley or any of his family own a '38? What kind of a lawyer is Sibley? And finally, where were Sibley's parking tickets given? Were they all in the same place? Where?"

"I'll do what I can."

"Fine. I'll be in my office from seven A.M. on tomorrow." Noonan blew his wife a kiss. Lorelei started to say something, but Noonan cut her off. "Yes, I know, my love. I'm talking to her now."

That seemed to satisfy Lorelei Noonan, and she headed for their traditional table in the corner of the room. Luigi stumbled over himself bringing her a menu and carafe of chianti.

"I take it your wife has arrived."

"You take it correctly, and I will talk to you tomorrow." Harrison might have said something, but Captain Noonan was already on his way across Lorenzo's Grill, hoping to get to his table before his wife took all the calamari.

Noonan was nursing a headache the next morning. It had been brought on, first, by a lengthy and meaningless visit from Police Commissioner Edward Paul Lizzard III about the public relations value of a proposed speech to the University of Washington's Student Law and Order Club—known by its semi-acronym SLOB among the officers who were seduced, cajoled, or threatened into making an appearance before the group, which, incidentally, was led by Lizzard's niece—and, second, by the impact of the third budget cut to his department in as many years. It would put four sergeants at risk, transfer three administrative assistants to Property, and close two storage rooms in the Seattle crime lab. Most distressing, it would force him to shift funds from the overtime account to the widely known but supposedly secret slush fund, which was available to Commissioner Lizzard. Lizzard was intent on funding a

public relations campaign declaring that "The Officer on the Beat Is Your Friend" although the Seattle police did not have officers on the beat. They were only on the street when they got out of their patrol cars to chase a perpetrator (if the ground was not slick with ice, snow, slush, or any other substance that made it difficult to maneuver upon or across).

Then the phone rang.

"Yeah." Noonan was not having a good morning.

"Captain Noonan?" The voice of Ms. Harrison was far too cheery for this particular morning.

"Harrison, right?"

"That's right, captain. I have some information for you. I hope you'll have some answers for me."

Noonan shook his head and looked at the door. "Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of men."

"The Shadow? I'm old enough to know that."

"Right." He leaned back, kicked his boots off, and put his stocking feet into a drawer opened for just that purpose. "The materializing corpse, the body from nowhere, the cadaver from thin air."

"Am I catching you on a bad day?"

"Today is just as bad as any other day. Don't worry, I can use

the mental exercise. Okay, I'm prepared. What do you have for me?"

"It's a long list, got a pencil?"

Noonan shook his head. "I have a terrific memory. Go for it."

There was a pause on the other end of the line, and Noonan could hear papers being shuffled.

"First, let's take Sibley. He's thirty-five, has been a lawyer for ten years in the firm of Harrison, Coriander, Smithson and Baldern. It's a modest-sized law firm that specializes in anything that makes money. Sibley is not a principal, but the general feeling is that his time is coming."

"What kind of law does he do?"

"As near as I can tell, corporate. Boring stuff like taxes, leases, bonding, shelters. What he doesn't do is criminal, civil, or divorce. His credit is good, but his debt load is high. Considering what I make and spend, he's not doing that badly."

"So his financial situation is stable?"

"He's worth a million and a half and makes three hundred fifty thousand dollars a year. Modest stock holdings, no bonds, a few CD's. That seems a little odd to me, but then I have a net worth of a two bedroom house and three cats and I only make thirty-eight thousand seven fifty plus bennies."

"How about criminal or civil matters?"

"None of merit. Other than the parking tickets, he's got a drunk driving arrest that was dropped, a gambling arrest that was thrown out of court, and a divorce."

"That's why he's only worth a million and a half but making three hundred fifty," snorted Noonan.

"Actually I thought that, too. But the divorce was amicable, with an equal splitting of the property."

Noonan scratched his head. "What about the gambling arrest?"

"He was picked up in a raid of an after-hours club. There was gambling going on, but he wasn't at a table."

"At the time or he wasn't gambling?"

"I don't know. All I do know is that the arresting officer apprehended him in the raid at the bar, not at a gambling table. Charges were dropped because they wanted to get the gamblers. He wasn't gambling; ergo, he was just visiting and so not prosecutable."

"Is that the way you do things up there?"

"Hey, I'm surprised they raided the place at all. Everyone knows everyone else's business in this town."

"And the drunk driving arrest?"

More paper shuffling. Noonan

reached for a cup of coffee on his desk. He looked inside the mug and saw that it was empty. With a dissatisfied grunt he plopped it back on his desk.

"That was recent. About a year ago and it wasn't an arrest. There was a fender bender, and the officer in charge suspected drunk driving as a cause. He pulled both parties in, one of them being Sibley. They were in the station for about four hours. Sibley talked his way out of a sobriety test and then started yelling about how this episode was nothing more than a sham to get him to pay illegally given parking tickets. We had a rookie on the desk that night and, well, Sibley walked. The other guy wasn't so lucky. He got a DWI."

"How about the search in the other states and Canada?"

"Not much. Nothing in the United States. But in Canada we did pick up a Sibley by the same name with a small trucking company. We called; it's not the same guy. He lives in Toronto. Sibley doesn't have a .38 registered, nor does anyone else in his immediate family. In fact, there are no guns at all registered to the family."

"Okay. How about Holliman?"

"Like I said before, a small-time hood. Gambling, dealing in stolen property, credit card fraud, GTA. All little stuff com-

pared to murder. No records on him in any other state or Canada. Got a divorce here in Michigan, which was not amicable, but then again there wasn't any money to split up. He's got a wife somewhere upstate living under an assumed name and a kid in private prep school in Detroit. She's seventeen. His parole officer says Holliman talks to the kid weekly and hopes he never talks to the psychobitch he calls his ex-wife ever again."

"Get any fingerprints on the John Doe?"

"Yes and no. His fingerprints are close to partials on two drug-related homicides in Detroit. I find it kind of surprising that we would find his prints close to a partial but not have them on file. To be on the partial list means you've got prints on file somewhere."

"Maybe he's a Federal undercover or in the Witness Protection Program."

"Could be. I'm working on that angle through the Feds. They're pretty good at telling us to butt out when we start stumbling into their territory."

"Don't I know it." Noonan stretched his legs and then dug for a breath mint in his desk drawer. "How long has Holliman been out of the hoosegow?"

"Sixteen months. Looked like he was keeping his nose clean. Reported to his parole officer on

the dot every Thursday. Wasn't drinking, no gambling. Made extra money by working swing and night shifts."

"Is he still doing the extra work?"

"Not for the past few months."

"Has he picked up any other side jobs since then?"

"According to his parole officer, no. He believes the man."

"Okay. Now, how about the towing company?"

"This one's pretty clean, sorry about that, chief. It's been in business for more than two decades. It's so clean the police even use it to haul their vehicles."

"Why'd they hire Holliman?"

"Part of a rehabilitation program. It was the police department's idea supported by the Chamber of Commerce. Not a bad one, let me add quickly, and it seems to be working."

"So Holliman was hauling police cars, too?"

"Well, there aren't that many police cars that have to be hauled anywhere. Usually it's impounded cars, wrecks whose tows are paid for by the city, cars with too many tickets, vehicles like that. Like I said before, we're a small town."

"But the police weren't picking up Sibley's car, were they? So much for law and order."

"That's right. But they weren't picking up his car because he re-

fused to pay his tickets and fought each one."

"Did they stop ticketing him?"

"No. The chief of police wanted the tickets to keep coming so he could charge Sibley with a slug of them. Then it might be worth their while."

Noonan rubbed his beard thoughtfully and then slowly pulled himself upright in his chair. "Okay, now let's get to the good stuff. Tell me about Sibley's parking tickets."

"Of those that are outstanding, all are from the same block. Actually, right in front of his law firm. Talk about arrogance. The two others are kind of strange. One is at the museum, and the second is in front of the Federal Building."

"Were those last two recent?"

"Within the last month, right."

"The Federal Building being the last one?"

"A week ago. Is that significant?"

"I don't know yet. Where was Sibley when his car was towed?"

"The car was in an alley behind a string of midtown warehouses. It's not an industrial area, more like storage areas for department stores. Not an area that attracts riffraff. Sibley was presumably in one of the warehouses."

"I'll bet the Sibley pickup was the last of the day."

"Right again. Holliman had

been sent off on a wild goose chase in the neighborhood. Someone phoned in to get a car removed from in front of his business, but when Holliman got to the address in question, there was no car. He looked around, spotted the Mercedes 210, and ran its plates."

"He didn't know what kind of car he was supposed to pick up?"

"Not really. That's not the way his business works. A lot of people don't know cars by sight any more. You and I in the law enforcement business do, but the average Joe on the street, nope. So Holliman did what he was supposed to do. Canvass the area and run the plates on suspicious cars. Besides, he's paid to haul in cars from the hot sheet."

"When Holliman got back to the tow yard, he was met immediately by someone?"

"They were closing down the yard for the night. Someone spotted the body as he drove in. Holliman hadn't even made it out of his truck."

"What was Sibley's response to the dead body?"

"Not much. He's still yelling and screaming about his vehicle's being in the impound yard. Right after that, his hot button is the tickets he will fight in court. He doesn't seem that interested in the body."

"Well, he'd better be. It'll

probably send him to jail for life."

"You've solved my problem?"

"No. I've made it worse."

"This is not going to make me a happy camper, is it?"

"No, I'm afraid it won't. I think your client's lying. Here's how I read it. Sibley has some kind of major financial drain. He's making too much to be worth only a million and a half. He's gone over the edge and is scrambling to cover himself. I'll bet it's gambling and he's gotten himself involved with some heavy who's leaning on him."

"That's quite a stretch from the information I gave you."

"Maybe. But let's look at all the facts. Holliman gets out of prison and starts working at a towing yard. He's busting himself to make every dime he can, probably to keep that daughter of his in prep school. Then all of a sudden he doesn't need the extra money. His parole officer says he didn't get another part-time job, so where was he getting that money?"

"Good question."

"Assuming this all ties together, I'll bet if you check your records you'll find that Sibley's car was towed by Holliman at that drunk driving incident. That's the connection between the two."

"I need some proof."

"Okay. See how Holliman is

paying for that prep school. Follow the money back. I think it will go to one of two places: one of the companies that owns the warehouse behind which Sibley's car was found or that shipping company in Toronto. More likely it'll be both."

"But the company in Canada is owned by a different Sibley."

"How do you know? You said that you called and talked to the guy. So? This is the age of cellular phones and call forwarding. You were probably talking to your Sibley there in town. Check the paperwork on that shipping company."

"But . . ."

"And while you're checking the paperwork, find out what happened at the INS office at the Federal Building on the day Sibley got that parking ticket. Your John Doe doesn't have any fingerprints on file. Why? Because he's probably not an American citizen. I'd bet he came in through Canada for some illegal work in Detroit, like those drug-related hits you mentioned, then got picked up for some minor offense. Sibley probably slipped him in using the shipping company in Toronto as a cover. Then, when the John Doe got picked up for something minor, Sibley was told to spring him. Sibley couldn't use his own name, so he undoubtedly did it under an alias. That's what he

was doing at the Federal Building. He took your John Doe back to the warehouse, shot him, and dumped his body in his own car. Then he called Holliman and told him to pick up the car. When Holliman showed up, Sibley told him to take the body back to the tow yard and slip the body into another vehicle. Maybe even a police vehicle."

"Why would Holliman do it?"

"Why did Holliman do it? Because he was dependent on Sibley's money. That was his gravy train. If Sibley went, he went. No more fancy school for his daughter. No more extra money."

"There's got to be an easier way of getting rid of a body."

"Not really. Sibley didn't see a link between himself and the illegal. He didn't sign in at INS, so there was no way to link him that way. He's probably a very silent partner at the warehouse, so even if you found his name, what would it prove? There's nothing solid to link him to the murder. Holliman didn't have the connections to get rid of a body. As you said before, he's a small-time hood. So they both did the best they could. Actually, it was a fairly foolproof plan. What would have happened if the police had found the John Doe a day later in another car?"

"Been very confused."

"Right. And both Sibley and

Holliman would have been covered. After all, Holliman would swear that Sibley's car was empty, and there was no apparent connection between the two. But when Holliman got back to the yard, the body was spotted. He didn't have any choice but to deny that the body had been there when he towed Sibley's car."

"It wasn't a very good lie."

"It was good enough to get you to call me."

Harrison was silent for a moment. "There's a lot of merit in what you say, but it's going to take a while to pull this case together."

Noonan shook his head. "I'm betting you won't have that much work to do. If it was Sibley you called when you were checking on the shipping company, he's been tipped and is gone. But I wouldn't worry about it. The people who sent the John Doe aren't going to have any trouble putting one and one together and fingering Sibley as the hit man. He won't be around long, wherever he is."

"How about Holliman?"

"He should cut a deal. Now."

"I hate to say it, but it looks like I've been fooled by a client."

"Get used to it. But you did learn one important thing from this case."

"Really? What was that?"

"Pay your parking tickets." □

FICTION

ALL'S FAIR

Dan Crawford



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Every year the Newberry Library in Chicago puts on a week-end-long exhibition of lust, greed, and high culture. This is the Newberry Library Book Fair. For three hundred sixty-one days prior to the Library Buddies' Preview, people in the community have been giving the library books to sell. All proceeds from the pushing and shoving of eager readers go to permit the library to buy more books for its own research collection.

The Newberry specializes in books about western culture, literature, genealogy, history, and other such unprofitable stuff. (The collection contains not a single book on trimming your tummy, making a hundred grand in real estate, or proving that Marilyn Monroe was murdered.) So it naturally happens that sometimes a book donor contributes a book the library would sooner keep than sell. No sense selling a book so the Newberry will have the money to buy the same book somewhere else.

Thus we volunteers extract from the donations any book that could conceivably fall within the scope of the library's collection. Everything else is then free to be sorted into one of the three dozen categories of books for sale: Westerns, poetry, anthropology, and so forth. The library has delegated one of its main men to come down and check through the pile we have set aside. Anything he decides the library needs he sets on a book truck, which goes upstairs for a more specialized volunteer to check against the collection. If the library does not indeed already have a copy, the book is carried off into the recesses of the cataloguing department, to emerge when it has been fully inducted, given the countersigns and secret handshake, et cetera.

It was a slow day, and I was working alone. Most of our donations do not come in as truckloads of first editions and autographed rarities. What we chiefly get are shopping bags with paperback romances and old magazines. I was pulling out the contents of a bag that had been left at the security kiosk out front and passed along. It was an assortment I call "mixed but old." There were some Modern Library literary masterpieces, a few paperbacks half a century old, a stained copy of *How to Win Friends and Influence People*—just basic book fair fodder.

Once you've sorted through a thousand such shopping bags, you begin to get a feel for what deserves special treatment. Books that are too old, too thin, too tall, too short—these are the books that get looked at a second time.

There was a slim volume that had an air about the cover that

said, "There weren't many of me; I'm one of the last ones left." I pried it from the bag.

The title page told me it was *Long Toad Moanin'* by James P. Peachtree, privately published in Norfolk, Virginia. None of this was very encouraging; even so, I flipped to a page farther back. Sometimes these little books published by nobodies are required for the Newberry's collection. But when I read the sonnet beginning, "When I descry a lea with cowslips filled," it went onto a stack of miscellaneous novels and literary classics for the fair.

"Good afternoon," someone said.

A tall man with greying hair was walking down the ramp onto the loading dock. "Hi," said I, and watched him come in. I didn't know him. He could be a donor, a staff member, a volunteer I hadn't met, a lost library patron, a deliveryman, a member of the library's Board of Good Buddies, or practically anybody at all. In these circumstances I like to restrict my conversation to single syllables until I know whether I'm supposed to welcome him with open arms or throw him out.

It might have been the way he walked without making any sound that tipped me off that I could do neither. But I definitely had it figured out when he walked through the massive front table.

"Good afternoon," he said again. "I'm dead."

"Are you?" I replied, still sticking to the single syllables.

"Oh yes," he said. "Since 1965."

"Um," said I, setting a stack of books between us as he came to a stop. "So how is it?"

"Well, let me tell you," he said, putting a leg up on the table and resting his weight, if any, there. "It isn't what I expected."

"No?"

"Not nearly." He shook his head. "I did expect the big gate and the crew behind it with the record books. They asked all the questions I expected, and checked my answers against the books. They checked me really thoroughly on vows or oaths that might call for me to stay on earth and haunt some particular place. Like the Flying Dutchman, if you've heard of him."

"I work in a library," I said. "I've read lots of things."

He blinked and opened his mouth, but he had to shake himself before any words came out. "Yes," he said, cutting it off sharp. "Anyway, we all agreed I hadn't, and we were about ready to wrap it up and let me pass in when one of them asked, 'Just one last thing. Have you ever been inside the Newberry Library? It's in Chicago.'"

"They never warned me about that in my religion classes," I noted, sitting on the table myself. This might turn out to be one of those long stories.

"No, and so I wasn't ready for how excited they got when I said I'd done just a little research there in the summer of 1920," he told me. "They went riffling through their records, and one of them just squealed when they found the page. 'You said you wished you had time to read every book in the library!' he shouted. I hadn't thought about that in years, but now that he mentioned it, I recalled saying that. I never did go back to the Newberry; it was something I was saving for retirement, but I never got that far."

"They didn't count that as a vow, did they?" I demanded. "It sounds like an offhand remark to me."

"It was," he said, "and they did. They apologized about it right enough, though that didn't help me any. The thing was that the Newberry was the only building of its size and age in Chicago that didn't have someone haunting it: Nobody who was connected with the Newberry was quite right for the job. The Newberrys themselves never even saw the place, so they couldn't be sent there. It was the Blatchfords who got the place built, and they were too hard-headed for good haunting. Some of the librarians and resident scholars had been sent in over the years, but those were all absent-minded souls who'd stay for a while and then wander off in search of footnotes. What they needed, they said, was someone between a scholar and a businessman. I fit right in; I made my start in literature, but I had to go into the family business after the Crash. And, too, I'd made that offhand remark. So they sent me back to earth to haunt the Newberry until such time as I had read every single volume in the library."

"Mm-hmm," said I. "Since 1965, eh? How far have you gotten?"

He glanced at the stack of books I had piled up for the library. I swallowed hard. Then he shrugged. "Do you have any idea how many of these books are written in languages I never had time to learn?"

"I see," I said. "If you've been around so long, how come I've never heard of you?"

"And every single copy of *Moby-Dick* they have around this place," he said, squinching his eyes shut. He shook his head. When his eyes reopened, he went on. "Heard of me? Well, I've been here. In fact, I sneak down this way every now and then to steal some of your foreign language textbooks. I may teach myself Anglo-Saxon yet."

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"You're welcome to them," I said. "They're not our big sellers anyway. It must all keep you too busy to do much real haunting."

"That's the frustrating part," he said, glancing again at that stack of books. "My connection with the library is so tenuous that I can just barely materialize enough to pick up the books. Those vaults are cold places to haunt, too. They have monitors in there that are supposed to detect the slightest motion after hours; I don't even register on those."

He raised a hand toward the stack of books and then let it drop. "I do what I can. I hide the books now and then, switch them on the shelves. I jostle display cases and set off the alarms when no one's in the exhibit halls. If I'm really in a bad mood, I gimmick up the entry gate so it won't open when the guard presses the release switch. This ghost business is not the real whee that the poltergeists make it seem."

"But when someone sees you, don't they . . . ?"

He stood up and put his right hand on top of the bookpile. "They can't see me. I can't even muster that much."

"I can see you," I pointed out. "Do I have hidden psychic powers no one ever told me about?"

"No," he said. "That is, I don't know. Didn't mean to insult you; you might, for all I know. My connection is just a little more personal just here, just now. I didn't introduce myself, but my name's Jim Peachtree."

I tried to place the name. "I . . . oh!"

"Yes." His hand came down on the book with that dreadful title off to one side from the pile for the library. "Yes, I wrote it. Trash." But as he picked it up, his hands slid up and down the sides, and he kept peeking at the cover when he thought I was looking somewhere else.

"I want it on that stack," he said, holding it toward the larger pile but not setting it down. "It's poetry," he said, looking at me. "Western literature, published before 1945. That fits this collection."

"Well," I said, "yes, but . . ."

He put the book back where it had been. "Anyway, that's what makes it possible for me to materialize. If you refuse, I can become even more noticeable, noisier. I become an angry ghost and may even get some chains to rattle. That would be something, at least."

He leaned forward and smiled. "And I can guarantee I will concentrate my efforts on the book fair."

I prefer not to offer the library anything really dubious, just to

show that I know what I'm doing. But now Peachtree was on the verge of threatening the book fair profits. I reached over, took up *Long Toad Moanin'*, and set it on the proper pile.

"Thanks," said the poet.

"You know I have no control over what he takes," I said.

The poet nodded. "I can always haunt him if he declines it." He smiled; it was a pleasant smile, really. "I can make him regret passing it up so much that he'll have to start searching the book catalogues for another copy just to shut me up. Maybe he'll have to go to an auction and bid it up to a record-breaking amount."

He was fainter and fainter. I watched him go.

Mr. Johnson came down to sort through the library pile later in the week. He passed *Long Toad Moanin'* over to the pile of rejects in seconds, without comment. I had expected that; there'd been time during the week for me to read some more of the poems.

Now, as Peachtree had pointed out, this got me and the book fair off the hook. But I wrote a book myself once. So while Mr. Johnson was distracted by a set of Mayhew's *London Poor*, I slipped that book of poetry out of the reject pile and slid it among the accepted books on the old tin cart. He generally notices things like that because his memory, when he chooses to apply it, is something phenomenal. But this was such a small book it didn't attract his attention.

Often, though, he notices these things when the cartload of books is sitting upstairs waiting to be checked against the catalogue. But *Long Toad Moanin'* did not come back down. Just as well; how could I possibly have put a price on it?

The ghost called Jim Peachtree has not been back. I expect he's still up there in the stacks, reading. And I know there's at least one book in the collection that he is glad to read over and over.

To each, as the French say, his own goo.

MYSTERY CLASSIC

# The Secret Garden

G. K. Chesterton





**A**ristide Valentin, chief of the Paris police, was late for his dinner, and some of his guests began to arrive before him. These were, however, reassured by his confidential servant Ivan, the old man with a scar and a face almost as grey as his mustaches who always sat at a table in the entrance hall—a hall hung with weapons. Valentin's house was perhaps as peculiar and celebrated as its master. It was an old house with high walls and tall poplars almost overhanging the Seine; but the oddity—and perhaps the police value—of its architecture was this: that there was no ultimate exit at all except through this front door, which was guarded by Ivan and the armory. The garden was large and elaborate, and there were many exits from the house into the garden. But there was no exit from the garden into the world outside; all round it ran a tall, smooth, unscalable wall with special spikes at the top; no bad garden, perhaps, for a man to reflect in whom some hundred criminals had sworn to kill.

As Ivan explained to the guests, their host had telephoned that he was detained for ten minutes. He was in truth making some last arrangements about executions and such ugly things, and though these duties were rootedly repulsive to him, he always performed them with precision. Ruthless in the pursuit of criminals, he was very mild about their punishment. Since he had been supreme over French—and largely over European—police methods, his great influence had been honorably used for the mitigation of sentences and the purification of prisons. He was one of the great humanitarian French freethinkers, and the only thing wrong with them is that they make mercy even colder than justice.

When Valentin arrived, he was already dressed in black clothes and the red rosette—an elegant figure, his dark beard already streaked with grey. He went straight through his house to his study, which opened on the grounds behind. The garden door of it was open, and after he had carefully locked his box in its official place, he stood for a few seconds at the open door looking out upon the garden. A sharp moon was fighting with the flying rags and tatters of a storm, and Valentin regarded it with a wistfulness unusual in such scientific natures as his. Perhaps such scientific natures have some psychic prevision of the most tremendous problem of their lives. From any such occult mood, at least, he quickly recovered, for he knew he was late and that his guests had already begun to arrive. A glance at his drawing room when he entered it was

*From The Innocence of Father Brown, copyright 1910, 1911 by The Curtis Publishing Co.*

enough to make certain that his principal guest was not there, at any rate. He saw all the other pillars of the little party: he saw Lord Galloway, the English ambassador—a choleric old man with a russet face like an apple, wearing the blue ribbon of the Garter. He saw Lady Galloway, slim and threadlike, with silver hair and a face sensitive and superior. He saw her daughter, Lady Margaret Graham, a pale and pretty girl with an elfish face and copper-colored hair. He saw the Duchess of Mont St. Michel, black-eyed and opulent, and with her two daughters, black-eyed and opulent also. He saw Dr. Simon, a typical French scientist, with glasses, a pointed brown beard, and a forehead barred with those parallel wrinkles which are the penalty of superciliousness, since they come through constantly elevating the eyebrows. He saw Father Brown of Cob-hole, in Essex, whom he had recently met in England. He saw—perhaps with more interest than any of those—a tall man in uniform, who had bowed to the Galloways without receiving any very hearty acknowledgment and who now advanced alone to pay his respects to his host. This was Commandant O'Brien of the French Foreign Legion. He was a slim yet somewhat swaggering figure, clean-shaven, dark-haired, and blue-eyed, and as seemed natural in an officer of that famous regiment of victorious failures and successful suicides, he had an air at once dashing and melancholy. He was by birth an Irish gentleman and in boyhood had known the Galloways—especially Margaret Graham. He had left his country after some crash of debts and now expressed his complete freedom from British etiquette by swinging about in uniform sabre and spurs. When he bowed to the ambassador's family, Lord and Lady Galloway bent stiffly, and Lady Margaret looked away.

But for whatever old causes such people might be interested in each other, their distinguished host was not specially interested in them. No one of them at least was in his eyes the guest of the evening. Valentin was expecting, for special reasons, a man of worldwide fame whose friendship he had secured during some of his great detective tours and triumphs in the United States. He was expecting Julius K. Brayne, that multimillionaire whose colossal and even crushing endowments of small religions have occasioned so much easy sport and easier solemnity for the American and English papers. Nobody could quite make out whether Mr. Brayne was an atheist or a Mormon or a Christian Scientist, but he was ready to pour money into any intellectual vessel so long as it was an untried vessel. One of his hobbies was to wait for the Amer-

ican Shakespeare—a hobby more patient than angling. He admired Walt Whitman but thought that Luke P. Tanner, of Paris, Pa., was more “progressive” than Whitman any day. He liked anything that he thought “progressive.” He thought Valentin was “progressive,” thereby doing him a grave injustice.

The solid appearance of Julius K. Brayne in the room was as decisive as a dinner bell. He had this great quality, which very few of us can claim, that his presence was as big as his absence. He was a huge fellow, as fat as he was tall, clad in complete evening black, without so much relief as a watch chain or a ring. His hair was white and well brushed back like a German’s; his face was red, fierce, and cherubic, with one dark tuft under the lower lip that threw up that otherwise infantile visage with an effect theatrical and even Mephistophelean. Not long, however, did that salon merely stare at the celebrated American; his lateness had already become a domestic problem, and he was sent with all speed into the dining room with Lady Galloway upon his arm.

Except on one point the Galloways were genial and casual enough. So long as Lady Margaret did not take the arm of that adventurer O’Brien her father was quite satisfied, and she had not done so; she had decorously gone in with Dr. Simon. Nevertheless, old Lord Galloway was restless and almost rude. He was diplomatic enough during dinner, but when, over the cigars, three of the younger men—Simon the doctor, Brown the priest, and the detrimental O’Brien, the exile in a foreign uniform—all melted away to mix with the ladies or smoke in the conservatory, then the English diplomatist grew very undiplomatic indeed. He was stung every sixty seconds with the thought that the scamp O’Brien might be signaling to Margaret somehow; he did not attempt to imagine how. He was left over the coffee with Brayne, the hoary Yankee who believed in all religions, and Valentin, the grizzled Frenchman who believed in none. They could argue with each other, but neither could appeal to him. After a time this “progressive” logomachy had reached a crisis of tedium; Lord Galloway got up also and sought the drawing room. He lost his way in long passages for some six or eight minutes: till he heard the high-pitched, didactic voice of the doctor and then the dull voice of the priest, followed by general laughter. They also, he thought with a curse, were probably arguing about “science and religion.” But the instant he opened the salon door he saw only one thing—he saw what was not there. He saw

that Commandant O'Brien was absent and that Lady Margaret was absent, too.

Rising impatiently from the drawing room as he had from the dining room, he stamped along the passage once more. His notion of protecting his daughter from the Irish-Algerian ne'er-do-well had become something central, and even mad, in his mind. As he went towards the back of the house, where was Valentin's study, he was surprised to meet his daughter, who swept past with a white, scornful face, which was a second enigma. If she had been with O'Brien, where was O'Brien? If she had not been with O'Brien, where had she been? With a sort of senile and passionate suspicion he groped his way to the dark back parts of the mansion and eventually found a servants' entrance that opened onto the garden. The moon with her scimitar had now ripped up and rolled away all the storm-wrack. The argent light lit up all four corners of the garden. A tall figure in blue was striding across the lawn towards the study door; a glint of moonlit silver on his facings picked him out as Commandant O'Brien.

He vanished through the french windows into the house, leaving Lord Galloway in an indescribable temper at once virulent and vague. The blue and silver garden, like a scene in a theater, seemed to taunt him with all that tyrannic tenderness against which his worldly authority was at war. The length and grace of the Irishman's stride enraged him as if he were a rival instead of a father; the moonlight maddened him. He was trapped as if by magic into a garden of troubadours, a Watteau fairyland, and willing to shake off such amorous imbecilities by speech, he stepped briskly after his enemy. As he did so, he tripped over some tree or stone in the grass, looked down at it first with irritation and then a second time with curiosity. The next instant the moon and the tall poplars looked at an unusual sight—an elderly English diplomatist running hard and crying or bellowing as he ran.

His hoarse shouts brought a pale face to the study door, the beaming glasses and worried brow of Dr. Simon, who heard the nobleman's first clear words. Lord Galloway was crying, "A corpse in the grass—a bloodstained corpse." O'Brien at least had gone utterly from his mind.

"We must tell Valentin at once," said the doctor when the other had brokenly described all that he had dared to examine. "It is fortunate that he is here"; and even as he spoke the great detective entered the study attracted by the cry. It was almost amusing to note

his typical transformation; he had come with the common concern of a host and a gentleman, fearing that some guest or servant was ill. When he was told the gory fact, he turned with all his gravity instantly bright and businesslike, for this, however abrupt and awful, was his business.

"Strange, gentlemen," he said as they hurried out into the garden, "that I should have hunted mysteries all over the earth and now one comes and settles in my own back yard. But where is the place?" They crossed the lawn less easily, as a slight mist had begun to rise from the river; but under the guidance of the shaken Galloway they found the body sunken in deep grass—the body of a very tall and broad-shouldered man. He lay face downwards, so they could only see that his big shoulders were clad in black cloth and that his big head was bald except for a wisp or two of brown hair that clung to his skull like wet seaweed. A scarlet serpent of blood crawled from under his fallen face.

"At least," said Simon, with a deep and singular intonation, "he is none of our party."

"Examine him, doctor," cried Valentin rather sharply. "He may not be dead."

The doctor bent down. "He is not quite cold, but I am afraid he is dead enough," he answered. "Just help me to lift him up."

They lifted him carefully an inch from the ground, and all doubts as to his being really dead were settled at once and frightfully. The head fell away. It had been entirely sundered from the body; whoever had cut his throat had managed to sever the neck as well. Even Valentin was slightly shocked. "He must have been as strong as a gorilla," he muttered.

Not without a shiver, though he was used to anatomical abortions, Dr. Simon lifted the head. It was slightly slashed about the neck and jaw, but the face was substantially unhurt. It was a ponderous, yellow face, at once sunken and swollen, with a hawklike nose and heavy lids—the face of a wicked Roman emperor, with, perhaps, a distant touch of a Chinese emperor. All present seemed to look at it with the coldest eye of ignorance. Nothing else could be noted about the man except that, as they had lifted his body, they had seen underneath it the white gleam of a shirtfront defaced with a red gleam of blood. As Dr. Simon said, the man had never been of their party. But he might very well have been trying to join it, for he had come dressed for such an occasion.

Valentin went down on his hands and knees and examined with

his closest professional attention the grass and ground for some twenty yards round the body, in which he was assisted less skillfully by the doctor and quite vaguely by the English lord. Nothing rewarded their grovelings except a few twigs, snapped or chopped into very small lengths, which Valentin lifted for an instant's examination and then tossed away.

"Twigs," he said gravely; "twigs, and a total stranger with his head cut off; that is all there is on this lawn."

There was an almost creepy stillness, and then the unnerved Galloway called out sharply:

"Who's that? Who's that over there by the garden wall?"

A small figure with a foolishly large head drew waveringly near them in the moonlit haze; looked for an instant like a goblin, but turned out to be the harmless little priest whom they had left in the drawing room.

"I say," he said meekly, "there are no gates to this garden, do you know."

Valentin's black brows had come together somewhat crossly as they did on principle at the sight of the cassock. But he was far too just a man to deny the relevance of the remark. "You are right," he said. "Before we find out how he came to be killed, we may have to find out how he came to be here. Now, listen to me, gentlemen. If it can be done without prejudice to my position and duty, we shall all agree that certain distinguished names might well be kept out of this. There are ladies, gentlemen, and there is a foreign ambassador. If we must mark it down as a crime, then it must be followed up as a crime. But till then I can use my own discretion. I am the head of the police; I am so public that I can afford to be private. Please Heaven, I will clear every one of my own guests before I call in my men to look for anybody else. Gentlemen, upon your honor you will none of you leave the house till tomorrow at noon; there are bedrooms for all. Simon, I think you know where to find my man Ivan in the front hall; he is a confidential man. Tell him to leave another servant on guard and come to me at once. Lord Galloway, you are certainly the best person to tell the ladies what has happened and prevent a panic. They also must stay. Father Brown and I will remain with the body."

When this spirit of the captain spoke in Valentin, he was obeyed like a bugle. Dr. Simon went through to the armory and routed out Ivan, the public detective's private detective. Galloway went to the drawing room and told the terrible news tactfully enough, so that

by the time the company assembled there the ladies were already startled and already soothed. Meanwhile the good priest and the good atheist stood at the head and foot of the dead man motionless in the moonlight, like symbolic statues of their two philosophies of death.

Ivan, the confidential man with the scar and the mustaches, came out of the house like a cannonball and came racing across the lawn to Valentin like a dog to his master. His livid face was quite lively with the glow of this domestic detective story, and it was with almost unpleasant eagerness that he asked his master's permission to examine the remains.

"Yes; look, if you like, Ivan," said Valentin, "but don't be long. We must go in and thrash this out in the house."

Ivan lifted the head and then almost let it drop.

"Why," he gasped, "it's—no, it isn't; it can't be. Do you know this man, sir?"

"No," said Valentin indifferently; "we had better go inside."

Between them they carried the corpse to a sofa in the study, and then all made their way to the drawing room.

The detective sat down at a desk quietly, and even with hesitation, but his eye was the iron eye of a judge at assizes. He made a few rapid notes upon paper in front of him and then said shortly, "Is everybody here?"

"Not Mr. Brayne," said the Duchess of Mont St. Michel, looking round.

"No," said Lord Galloway in a hoarse, harsh voice. "And not Mr. Neil O'Brien, I fancy. I saw that gentleman walking in the garden when the corpse was still warm."

"Ivan," said the detective, "go and fetch Commandant O'Brien and Mr. Brayne. Mr. Brayne, I know, is finishing a cigar in the dining room; Commandant O'Brien, I think, is walking up and down the conservatory. I am not sure."

The faithful attendant flashed from the room, and before anyone could stir or speak Valentin went on with the same soldierly swift-ness of exposition.

"Everyone here knows that a dead man has been found in the garden, his head cut clean from his body. Dr. Simon, you have examined it. Do you think that to cut a man's throat like that would need great force? Or, perhaps, only a very sharp knife?"

"I should say that it could not be done with a knife at all," said the pale doctor.



"Have you any thought," resumed Valentin, "of a tool with which it could be done?"

"Speaking within modern probabilities I really haven't," said the doctor, arching his painful brows. "It's not easy to hack a neck through even clumsily, and this was a very clean cut. It could be done with a battle-axe or an old headsman's axe or an old two-handed sword."

"But good heavens!" cried the duchess, almost in hysterics, "there aren't any two-handed swords and battle-axes round here."

Valentin was still busy with the paper in front of him. "Tell me," he said, still writing rapidly, "could it have been done with a long French cavalry sabre?"

A low knocking came at the door, which for some unreasonable reason curdled everyone's blood like the knocking in *Macbeth*. Amid that frozen silence Dr. Simon managed to say, "A sabre—yes, I suppose it could."

"Thank you," said Valentin. "Come in, Ivan."

The confidential Ivan opened the door and ushered in Commandant Neil O'Brien, whom he had found at last pacing the garden again.

The Irish officer stood disordered and defiant on the threshold. "What do you want with me?" he cried.

"Please sit down," said Valentin in pleasant, level tones. "Why, you aren't wearing your sword! Where is it?"

"I left it on the library table," said O'Brien, his brogue deepening in his disturbed mood. "It was a nuisance, it was getting—"

"Ivan," said Valentin, "please go and get the commandant's sword from the library." Then, as the servant vanished, "Lord Galloway says he saw you leaving the garden just before he found the corpse. What were you doing in the garden?"

The commandant flung himself recklessly into a chair. "Oh," he cried in pure Irish, "admirin' the moon. Communing with Nature, me boy."

A heavy silence sank and endured, and at the end of it came again that trivial and terrible knocking. Ivan now appeared, carrying an empty steel scabbard. "This is all I can find," he said.

"Put it on the table," said Valentin without looking up.

There was an inhuman silence in the room like that sea of inhuman silence round the dock of the condemned murderer. The duchess's weak exclamations had long ago died away. Lord Gal-

loway's swollen hatred was satisfied and even sobered. The voice that came was quite unexpected.

"I think I can tell you," cried Lady Margaret in that clear, quivering voice with which a courageous woman speaks publicly. "I can tell you what Mr. O'Brien was doing in the garden since he is bound to silence: He was asking me to marry him. I refused; I said in my family circumstances I could give him nothing but my respect. He was a little angry at that; he did not seem to think much of my respect. I wonder," she added with rather a wan smile, "if he will care at all for it now. For I offer it him now. I will swear anywhere that he never did a thing like this."

Lord Galloway had edged up to his daughter and was intimidating her in what he imagined to be an undertone. "Hold your tongue, Maggie," he said in a thunderous whisper. "Why should you shield the fellow? Where's his sword? Where's his confounded cavalry?"

He stopped because of the singular stare with which his daughter was regarding him, a look that was indeed a lurid magnet for the whole group.

"You old fool!" she said in a low voice without pretense of piety. "What do you suppose you are trying to prove? I tell you this man was innocent while with me. But if he wasn't innocent, he was still with me. If he murdered a man in the garden, who was it who must have seen—who must at least have known? Do you hate Neil so much as to put your own daughter—"

Lady Galloway screamed. Everyone else sat tingling at the touch of those satanic tragedies that have been between lovers before now. They saw the proud, white face of the Scotch aristocrat and her lover, the Irish adventurer, like old portraits in a dark house. The long silence was full of formless historical memories of murdered husbands and poisonous paramours.

In the center of this morbid silence an innocent voice said, "Was it a very long cigar?"

The change of thought was so sharp that they had to look round to see who had spoken.

"I mean," said little Father Brown from the corner of the room, "I mean that cigar Mr. Brayne is finishing. It seems nearly as long as a walking stick."

Despite the irrelevance, there was assent as well as irritation in Valentin's face as he lifted his head.

"Quite right," he remarked sharply. "Ivan, go and see about Mr. Brayne again, and bring him here at once."

The instant the factotum had closed the door, Valentin addressed the girl with an entirely new earnestness.

"Lady Margaret," he said, "we all feel, I am sure, both gratitude and admiration for your act in rising above your lower dignity and explaining the commandant's conduct. But there is a hiatus still. Lord Galloway, I understand, met you passing from the study to the drawing room, and it was only some minutes afterwards that he found the garden and the commandant still walking there."

"You have to remember," replied Margaret, with a faint irony in her voice, "that I had just refused him, so we should scarcely have come back arm in arm. He is a gentleman, anyhow, and he loitered behind—and so got charged with murder."

"In those few moments," said Valentin gravely, "he might really—"

The knock came again, and Ivan put in his scarred face.

"Beg pardon, sir," he said, "but Mr. Brayne has left the house."

"Left!" cried Valentin, and rose for the first time to his feet.

"Gone. Scooted. Evaporated," replied Ivan in humorous French. "His hat and coat are gone, too, and I'll tell you something to cap it all. I ran outside the house to find any traces of him, and I found one, and a big trace, too."

"What do you mean?" asked Valentin.

"I'll show you," said his servant, and reappeared with a flashing naked cavalry sabre, streaked with blood about the point and edge. Everyone in the room eyed it as if it were a thunderbolt, but the experienced Ivan went on quite quietly:

"I found this," he said, "flung among the bushes fifty yards up the road to Paris. In other words, I found it just where your respectable Mr. Brayne threw it when he ran away."

There was again a silence but of a new sort. Valentin took the sabre, examined it, reflected with unaffected concentration of thought, and then turned a respectful face to O'Brien. "Commandant," he said, "we trust you will always produce this weapon if it is wanted for police examination. Meanwhile," he added, slapping the steel back in the ringing scabbard, "let me return you your sword."

At the military symbolism of the action the audience could hardly refrain from applause.

For Neil O'Brien, indeed, that gesture was the turning point of existence. By the time he was wandering in the mysterious garden again in the colors of the morning the tragic futility of his ordinary

mien had fallen from him; he was a man with many reasons for happiness. Lord Galloway was a gentleman and had offered him an apology. Lady Margaret was something better than a lady, a woman at least, and had perhaps given him something better than an apology as they drifted among the old flowerbeds before breakfast. The whole company was more lighthearted and humane, for though the riddle of the death remained, the load of suspicion was lifted off them all and sent flying off to Paris with the strange millionaire—a man they hardly knew. The devil was cast out of the house—he had cast himself out.

Still, the riddle remained, and when O'Brien threw himself on a garden seat beside Dr. Simon, that keenly scientific person at once resumed it. He did not get much talk out of O'Brien, whose thoughts were on pleasanter things.

"I can't say it interests me much," said the Irishman frankly, "especially as it seems pretty plain now. Apparently Brayne hated this stranger for some reason, lured him into the garden, and killed him with my sword. Then he fled to the city, tossing the sword away as he went. By the way, Ivan tells me the dead man had a Yankee dollar in his pocket. So he was a countryman of Brayne's, and that seems to clinch it. I don't see any difficulties about the business."

"There are five colossal difficulties," said the doctor quietly, "like high walls within walls. Don't mistake me. I don't doubt that Brayne did it; his flight, I fancy, proves that. But as to how he did it. First difficulty: Why should a man kill another man with a great hulking sabre when he can almost kill him with a pocketknife and put it back in his pocket? Second difficulty: Why was there no noise or outcry? Does a man commonly see another come up waving a scimitar and offer no remarks? Third difficulty: A servant watched the front door all the evening, and a rat cannot get into Valentin's garden anywhere. How did the dead man get into the garden? Fourth difficulty: Given the same conditions, how did Brayne get out of the garden?"

"And the fifth," said Neil, with eyes fixed on the English priest, who was coming slowly up the path.

"Is a trifle, I suppose," said the doctor, "but I think an odd one. When I first saw how the head had been slashed, I supposed the assassin had struck more than once. But on examination I found many cuts across the truncated section; in other words, they were struck *after* the head was off. Did Brayne hate his foe so fiendishly that he stood sabring his body in the moonlight?"

"Horrible!" said O'Brien, and shuddered.

The little priest, Brown, had arrived while they were talking and had waited with characteristic shyness till they had finished. Then he said awkwardly:

"I say, I'm sorry to interrupt. But I was sent to tell you the news!"

"News?" repeated Simon, and stared at him rather painfully through his glasses.

"Yes, I'm sorry," said Father Brown mildly. "There's been another murder, you know."

Both men on the seat sprang up, leaving it rocking.

"And what's stranger still," continued the priest with his dull eyes on the rhododendrons, "it's the same disgusting sort; it's another beheading. They found the second head actually bleeding in the river a few yards along Brayne's road to Paris, so they suppose that he—"

"Great Heaven!" cried O'Brien. "Is Brayne a monomaniac?"

"There are American vendettas," said the priest impassively. Then he added, "They want you to come to the library and see it."

Commandant O'Brien followed the others towards the inquest, feeling decidedly sick. As a soldier he loathed all this secretive carnage; where were these extravagant amputations going to stop? First one head was hacked off and then another; in this case (he told himself bitterly) it was not true that two heads were better than one. As he crossed the study he almost staggered at a shocking coincidence. Upon Valentin's table lay the colored picture of yet a third bleeding head, and it was the head of Valentin himself. A second glance showed him it was only a Nationalist paper called *The Guillotine*, which every week showed one of its political opponents with rolling eyes and writhing features just after execution, for Valentin was an anticlerical of some note. But O'Brien was an Irishman, with a kind of chastity even in his sins, and his gorge rose against that great brutality of the intellect which belongs only to France. He felt Paris as a whole, from the grotesques on the Gothic churches to the gross caricatures in the newspapers. He remembered the gigantic jests of the Revolution. He saw the whole city as one ugly energy, from the sanguinary sketch lying on Valentin's table up to where, above a mountain and forest of gargoyles, the great devil grins on Notre Dame.

The library was long, low, and dark; what light entered it shot from under low blinds and had still some of the ruddy tinge of morning. Valentin and his servant Ivan were waiting for them at

the upper end of a long, slightly sloping desk on which lay the mortal remains, looking enormous in the twilight. The big black figure and yellow face of the man found in the garden confronted them essentially unchanged. The second head, which had been fished from among the river reeds that morning, lay streaming and dripping beside it; Valentin's men were still seeking to recover the rest of this second corpse, which was supposed to be afloat. Father Brown, who did not seem to share O'Brien's sensibilities in the least, went up to the second head and examined it with his blinking care. It was little more than a mop of wet, white hair, fringed with silver fire in the red and level morning light; the face, which seemed of an ugly, empurpled, and perhaps criminal type, had been much battered against trees or stones as it tossed in the water.

"Good morning, Commandant O'Brien," said Valentin with quiet cordiality. "You have heard of Brayne's last experiment in butchery, I suppose?"

Father Brown was still bending over the head with white hair, and he said, without looking up:

"I suppose it is quite certain that Brayne cut off this head, too."

"Well, it seems common sense," said Valentin, with his hands in his pockets. "Killed in the same way as the other. Found within a few yards of the other. And sliced by the same weapon which we know he carried away."

"Yes, yes; I know," replied Father Brown submissively. "Yet, you know, I doubt whether Brayne could have cut off this head."

"Why not?" inquired Dr. Simon with a rational stare.

"Well, doctor," said the priest, looking up blinking, "can a man cut off his own head? I don't know."

O'Brien felt an insane universe crashing about his ears, but the doctor sprang forward with impetuous practicality and pushed back the wet, white hair.

"Oh, there's no doubt it's Brayne," said the priest quietly. "He had exactly that chip in the left ear."

The detective, who had been regarding the priest with steady and glittering eyes, opened his clenched mouth and said sharply, "You seem to know a lot about him, Father Brown."

"I do," said the little man simply. "I've been about with him for some weeks. He was thinking of joining our church."

The star of the fanatic sprang into Valentin's eyes; he strode towards the priest with clenched hands. "And perhaps," he cried with

a blasting sneer, "perhaps he was also thinking of leaving all his money to your church."

"Perhaps he was," said Brown stolidly; "it is possible."

"In that case," cried Valentin with a dreadful smile, "you may indeed know a great deal about him. About his life and about his—"

Commandant O'Brien laid a hand on Valentin's arm. "Drop that slanderous rubbish, Valentin," he said, "or there may be more swords yet."

But Valentin (under the steady, humble gaze of the priest) had already recovered himself. "Well," he said shortly, "people's private opinions can wait. You gentlemen are still bound by your promise to stay; you must enforce it on yourselves—and on each other. Ivan here will tell you anything more you want to know. I must get to business and write to the authorities. We can't keep this quiet any longer. I shall be writing in my study if there is any more news."

"Is there any more news, Ivan?" asked Dr. Simon, as the chief of police strode out of the room.

"Only one more thing, I think, sir," said Ivan, wrinkling up his grey old face, "but that's important, too, in its way. There's that old buffer you found on the lawn," and he pointed without pretense of reverence at the big black body with the yellow head. "We've found out who he is, anyhow."

"Indeed!" cried the astonished doctor; "and who is he?"

"His name was Arnold Becker," said the underdetective, "though he went by many aliases. He was a wandering sort of scamp and is known to have been in America, so that was where Brayne got his knife into him. We didn't have much to do with him ourselves, for he worked mostly in Germany. We've communicated, of course, with the German police. But, oddly enough, there was a twin brother of his, named Louis Becker, whom we had a great deal to do with. In fact, we found it necessary to guillotine him only yesterday. Well, it's a rum thing, gentlemen, but when I saw that fellow flat on the lawn I had the greatest jump of my life. If I hadn't seen Louis Becker guillotined with my own eyes, I'd have sworn it was Louis Becker lying there in the grass. Then, of course, I remembered his twin brother in Germany, and following up the clue—"

The explanatory Ivan stopped for the excellent reason that nobody was listening to him. The commandant and the doctor were both staring at Father Brown, who had sprung stiffly to his feet and was holding his temples tight like a man in sudden and violent pain.



"Stop, stop, stop!" he cried; "stop talking a minute, for I see half. Will God give me strength? Will my brain make the one jump and see all? Heaven help me! I used to be fairly good at thinking. I could paraphrase any page in Aquinas once. Will my head split—or will it see? I see half—I only see half."

He buried his head in his hands and stood in a sort of rigid torture of thought or prayer, while the other three could only go on staring at this last prodigy of their wild twelve hours.

When Father Brown's hands fell, they showed a face quite fresh and serious, like a child's. He heaved a huge sigh and said, "Let us get this said and done with as quickly as possible. Look here, this will be the quickest way to convince you all of the truth." He turned to the doctor. "Dr. Simon," he said, "you have a strong head-piece, and I heard you this morning asking the five hardest questions about this business. Well, if you will now ask them again, I will answer them."

Simon's pince-nez dropped from his nose in his doubt and wonder, but he answered at once. "Well, the first question, you know, is why a man should kill another with a clumsy sabre at all when a man can kill with a bodkin?"

"A man cannot behead with a bodkin," said Brown, calmly, "and for *this* murder beheading was absolutely necessary."

"Why?" asked O'Brien with interest.

"And the next question?" asked Father Brown.

"Well, why didn't the man cry out or anything?" asked the doctor; "sabres in gardens are certainly unusual."

"Twigs," said the priest gloomily, and turned to the window which looked on the scene of death. "No one saw the point of the twigs. Why should they lie on that lawn (look at it) so far from any tree? They were not snapped off; they were chopped off. The murderer occupied his enemy with some tricks with the sabre, showing how he could cut a branch in mid-air or what not. Then, while his enemy bent down to see the result, a silent slash, and the head fell."

"Well," said the doctor slowly, "that seems plausible enough. But my next two questions will stump anyone."

The priest still stood looking critically out of the window and waited.

"You know how all the garden was sealed up like an air-tight chamber," went on the doctor. "Well, how did the strange man get into the garden?"

Without turning round the little priest answered, "There never was any strange man in the garden."

There was a silence, and then a sudden cackle of almost childish laughter relieved the strain. The absurdity of Brown's remark moved Ivan to open taunts.

"Oh!" he cried; "then we didn't lug a great fat corpse onto a sofa last night? He hadn't got into the garden, I suppose?"

"Got into the garden?" repeated Brown reflectively. "No, not entirely."

"Hang it all," cried Simon, "a man gets into a garden, or he doesn't."

"Not necessarily," said the priest with a faint smile. "What is the next question, doctor?"

"I fancy you're ill," exclaimed Dr. Simon sharply, "but I'll ask the next question if you like. How did Brayne get out of the garden?"

"He didn't get out of the garden," said the priest, still looking out of the window.

"Didn't get out of the garden?" exploded Simon.

"Not completely," said Father Brown.

Simon shook his fists in a frenzy of French logic. "A man gets out of a garden, or he doesn't," he cried.

"Not always," said Father Brown.

Dr. Simon sprang to his feet impatiently. "I have no time to spare on such senseless talk," he cried angrily. "If you can't understand a man being on one side of the wall or the other, I won't trouble you further."

"Doctor," said the cleric very gently, "we have always got on very pleasantly together. If only for the sake of old friendship, stop and tell me your fifth question."

The impatient Simon sank into a chair by the door and said briefly, "The head and shoulders were cut about in a queer way. It seemed to be done after death."

"Yes," said the motionless priest, "it was done so as to make you assume exactly the one simple falsehood that you did assume. It was done to make you take for granted that the head belonged to the body."

The borderland of the brain, where all monsters are made, moved horribly in the Gaelic O'Brien. He felt the chaotic presence of all the horse-men and fish-women that man's unnatural fancy has begotten. A voice older than his first fathers seemed saying in his ear, "Keep out of the monstrous garden where grows the tree with dou-

ble fruit. Avoid the evil garden where died the man with two heads." Yet while these shameful symbolic shapes passed across the ancient mirror of his Irish soul, his Frenchified intellect was quite alert and was watching the odd priest as closely and incredulously as all the rest.

Father Brown had turned round at last and stood against the window with his face in dense shadow, but even in that shadow they could see it was pale as ashes. Nevertheless, he spoke quite sensibly, as if there were no Gaelic souls on earth.

"Gentlemen," he said, "you did not find the strange body of Becker in the garden. You did not find any strange body in the garden. In face of Dr. Simon's rationalism, I still affirm that Becker was only partly present. Look here!" (pointing to the black bulk of the mysterious corpse) "you never saw that man in your lives. Did you ever see this man?"

He rapidly rolled away the bald-yellow head of the unknown and put in its place the white-maned head beside it. And there, complete, unified, unmistakable, lay Julius K. Brayne.

"The murderer," went on Brown quietly, "hacked off his enemy's head and flung the sword far over the wall. But he was too clever to fling the sword only. He flung the *head* over the wall also. Then he had only to clap on another head to the corpse, and (as he insisted on a private inquest) you all imagined a totally new man."

"Clap on another head!" said O'Brien, staring. "What other head? Heads don't grow on garden bushes, do they?"

"No," said Father Brown huskily, and looking at his boots, "there is only one place where they grow. They grow in the basket of the guillotine, beside which the chief of police, Aristide Valentin, was standing not an hour before the murder. Oh, my friends, hear me a minute more before you tear me in pieces. Valentin is an honest man if being mad for an arguable cause is honesty. But did you ever see in that cold, grey eye of his that he is mad? He would do anything, *anything*, to break what he calls the superstition of the Cross. He has fought for it and starved for it, and now he has murdered for it. Brayne's crazy millions had hitherto been scattered among so many sects that they did little to alter the balance of things. But Valentin heard a whisper that Brayne, like so many scatterbrained skeptics, was drifting to us, and that was quite a different thing. Brayne would pour supplies into the impoverished and pugnacious Church of France; he would support six Nationalist newspapers like *The Guillotine*. The battle was already balanced on

a point, and the fanatic took flame at the risk. He resolved to destroy the millionaire, and he did it as one would expect the greatest of detectives to commit his only crime. He abstracted the severed head of Becker on some criminological excuse and took it home in his official box. He had that last argument with Brayne that Lord Galloway did not hear the end of; that failing, he led him out into the sealed garden, talked about swordsmanship, used twigs and a sabre for illustration, and—"

Ivan of the Scar sprang up. "You lunatic," he yelled, "you'll go to my master now if I take you by—"

"Why, I was going there," said Brown heavily. "I must ask him to confess, and all that."

Driving the unhappy Brown before them like a hostage or sacrifice, they rushed together into the sudden stillness of Valentin's study.

The great detective sat at his desk apparently too occupied to hear their turbulent entrance. They paused a moment, and then something in the look of that upright and elegant back made the doctor run forward suddenly. A touch and a glance showed him that there was a small box of pills at Valentin's elbow, and that Valentin was dead in his chair; and on the blind face of the suicide was more than the pride of Cato.

*For back issues, send your check for \$5.00 (U.S. funds) to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, Suite 1500, 251 Main Street, Stamford, CT 06901-2988. Please specify the issue you are ordering. Add \$2.00 per copy for delivery outside the U.S.*

# BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



**F**antasy author Barbra Hambly has joined the ranks of historical-mystery writers with a smashing debut novel, **A Free Man of Color** (Bantam, \$22.95), set in nineteenth century New Orleans. Ben Lincoln is a darkskinned Creole now home after a self-imposed exile in Paris, where he worked as a physician. Except for more steamboat traffic and more uncouth and unruly Kaintucks, things are much as they were when he left, "the free colored in their pastel cottages along Rue des Ramparts and Rue Claiborne, the French in their close-crowded town houses, and the Americans in the oak-shaded suburbs where the cane fields had been—the slaves in their cramped outbuildings and attics." In lush detail Hambly recreates the world of the demimonde and the Mardi Gras balls, the plight of slaves, and the intricate social structure of a city that for generations has strictly adhered to rules unique to New Orleans. Ben is a wonderful character, strong and tempered by personal grief, smart and courageous. He will need all those qualities as well as the help of his family and friends when he goes to the aid of a former music pupil, now the young widow of a profligate plantation owner, who is fighting for her own freedom. A rich story with well-drawn characters, memorable action scenes, and a sense of place so strongly rendered that it surrounds the reader.

If you're looking for a private eye with hard-edged skills and a soft center, try Greg Rucka's **Finder** (Bantam, \$22.95). Atticus Kodiak, narrator, is a soldier turned professional bodyguard. It's been three months since his partner died, and Atticus is halfheartedly working as a bouncer at a "rough trade" Manhattan club when he spies Erika. He separates her—the teenage daughter of a woman he had an affair with when he was a young soldier—from a guy

with a knife and plunges into the task of keeping her safe from abduction by a rogue cell of highly trained mercenaries. There's lots of action, lots of weaponry, and lots of machinations as Atticus slowly begins to piece the puzzle together, a chilling story of greed and vengeance between Erika's divorced parents. It's a wild ride.

Margaret Maron's Judge Deborah Knott arrives in High Point, North Carolina, to fill in for a colleague, only to find herself in the midst of a **Killer Market** (Mysterious, \$22). It's the week of the International Home Furnishings show, the largest of its kind in the world, and although there are plenty of beds in the showrooms, it looks as if there are none to be had as accommodations for a weary visiting judge. Maron has chosen a bright and exciting backdrop for her whodunit and has filled it with colorful artistes, competitors perpetrating ripoffs and furniture knockoffs, and manufacturers manipulating cutthroat distribution deals. In the middle of the mayhem is the stolid and witty Deborah—too much in the thick of it, in fact, when she becomes the prime suspect in a murder. Maron maintains her impeccably high standards in this appealing series.

Dennis Lehane, a winner of the Private Eye Writers of America's Shamus award, delivers another literate thriller featuring the team of Patrick Kenzie and Angie Genarro. **Sacred** (Morrow, \$23) opens with a harrowing scene: our heroes are kidnapped and taken to dying billionaire Trevor Stone, a man who wants to be their next client. His wife recently dead in a car crash, Stone wishes to reclaim his grown daughter Desiree, who he claims is obsessed by grief. With few clues and many misgivings, the team begin their search. What they learn not only casts doubt on their entire mission, it also begins to get the people who are working with them killed. The duo is between a rock and a hard place, with forces of enormous wealth, power, and pure evil straining at them from both sides. Lehane gives readers harrowing action, two sympathetic protagonists, and a shocker of an ending.

Author Sarah Andrews is a professional geologist. So is her protagonist Em Hansen in the latest in this series, **Mother Nature** (St. Martin's, \$23.95), which again proves that geology makes a fascinating canvas for murder. Em, unemployed and depressed over her father's death, can offer little resistance when an obnoxious senator wants her to look into his daughter Janet's recent murder in California. Janet worked for an environmental services company, and her body was found in a ditch—both good reasons, it seems to Em, to begin her sleuthing at Janet's old job. So she goes under-

cover and finds herself in the midst of a feud between the community's water board and some developers. She's menaced by a hulking local character, stalked by a teen on a bike, haunted by memories of her brother's drowning, and almost swept away in a flood, all of which makes for a pretty exciting chapter in a scientist's life.

Washington *Post* food critic Phyllis Richman also writes about what she knows in her first novel, **The Butter Did It** (Harper-Collins, \$23). At fifty Chas Wheatley is D.C.'s best-known food and restaurant critic. She's a former restaurant owner, the ex-wife of a top chef, the current lover of an investigative reporter at her paper, and an old friend and erstwhile lover of the city's finest French chef, Laurence Levain. The night before the city's premiere food extravaganza, Levain dies of an apparent heart attack. Chas has reason to think it was murder so she takes her story to homicide detective Homer Jones, a young black cop who's also a self-styled gourmand; he's more interested in discussing the menu. Someone, however, has every reason to think Chas is right. A frothy and delicious cosy, a whodunit soufflé laced with wit and chock-full of insider's morsels about restaurateurs and their culinary ways.

It's time for a big new novel set in the Russia of tomorrow, and Donald James's **Monstrum** is it (Villard, \$24.95). The year is 2015, and the narrator is Police Inspector Constantin Vadim, a man who's managed to survive the recent civil war in the rural town of his birth by staying on the right side of the winning government and drowning thoughts of his ex-wife Julia and their dead son in a vodka bottle. Suddenly, through the machinations of a childhood buddy who's risen to a high rank since the war, Vadim finds himself undergoing cosmetic surgery and rigid training for a new assignment: he will act as a double for the country's new vice president, making public appearances for a man whose real work is much behind the scenes. Vadim is transferred to Moscow; his cover is that of a senior inspector brought in to handle the "Monstrum" case of a serial killer who horribly mutilates his victims. But a Russian always looks for the plots within plots, so Vadim understands that his old friend is also out to find Julia, the anarchist general of an all-female brigade; she's in hiding, and Vadim is the staked goat. *Monstrum* succeeds brilliantly as a crime story, as a political thriller, and as psychological suspense, but it is also the powerful tale of Vadim, a sympathetic Russian who loves his country mightily but must come to terms with her bloody history.



# THE STORY THAT WON



The May Mysterious Photo-Robert Kesling of Ann Arbor, tions go to Lorraine Boschi of James E. Pirkey of Allandale, Houston, Texas; Alfred W. nia; Vicki Sansum of Hous-Calgary, Alberta, Canada; Ohio; David Magnusson of Hialeah, Florida; and Louis Bretz of Amarillo, Texas.

graph contest was won by Michigan. Honorable men-Grand Junction, Colorado; Florida; Lynn Chatman of Cross of Sacramento, Californ-ton, Texas; R. J. Stevens of Jeri A. Sheaffer of Canton,

## EXERCISING EXORCISM by Robert Kesling

The bizarre tale originated when an ambitious young reporter, hoping for a scoop, accompanied Patrolman O'Donnel on his downtown beat. "The nerve o' some people," declared the patrolman, "parkin' that vehicle in Lincoln Square! Watch me ticket 'im."

Approaching the aluminum mobile home, he knocked. No response. He opened the door. From inside an ominous voice threatened, "*One step inside and the whole city disappears!*"

"Holy Christopher!" exclaimed the patrolman. "The bloody thing's haunted!"

"What'll you do now?" asked the reporter.

"Call headquarte~~ts~~."

Captain Feldman answered the phone. "Abandoned, you say? And threatening to make the city *disappear*? Sounds like another anarchist. I'll send the bomb squad. Keep everyone away!"

The bomb squad arrived and debated how to deactivate an entire mobile home. Someone suggested X-raying it. But how? Meanwhile, they cordoned off the area. The reporter's story made tabloid headlines: HAUNTED MOBILE HOME Baffles AUTHORITIES! Curious crowds gathered, gaping in fascinated awe from the barricades.

Michael Czyk, the unemployed engineer trying to market his patented protection device, returned. The unexpected publicity thrilled him. Still, he needed to get back inside his mobile home to rewind the tape recorder. Near midnight he succeeded. He imbibed rather freely, undressed, and fell asleep. Something awakened him. He was moving! Outside, Patrolman O'Donnel was shouting, "Anither ten feet, boys, and into the river she goes!"

Wasting no time, Czyk leaped out, naked, running pell-mell.

"See?" yelled O'Donnel triumphantly. "*There goes the thing what's haunted it! Me auld mither always said ghosts hate water.*"

Henri Silberman, N.Y.C.

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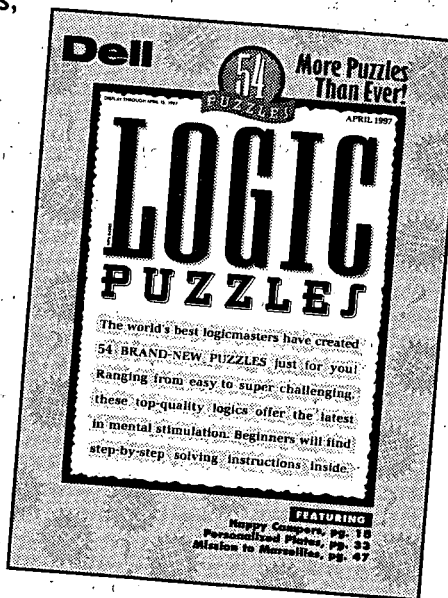
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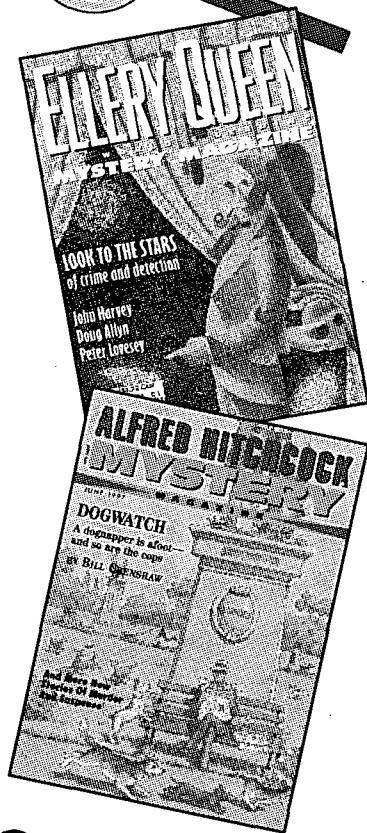
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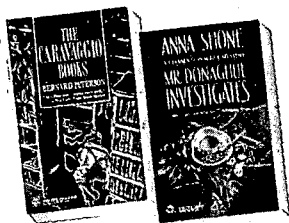
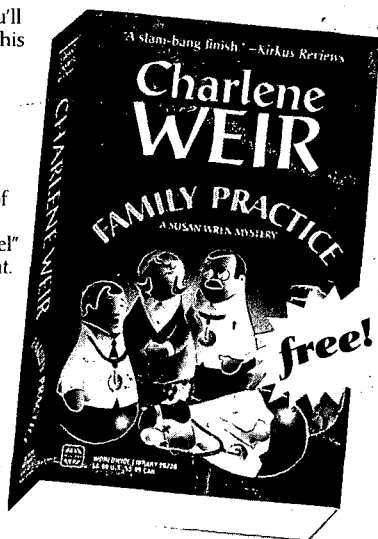
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